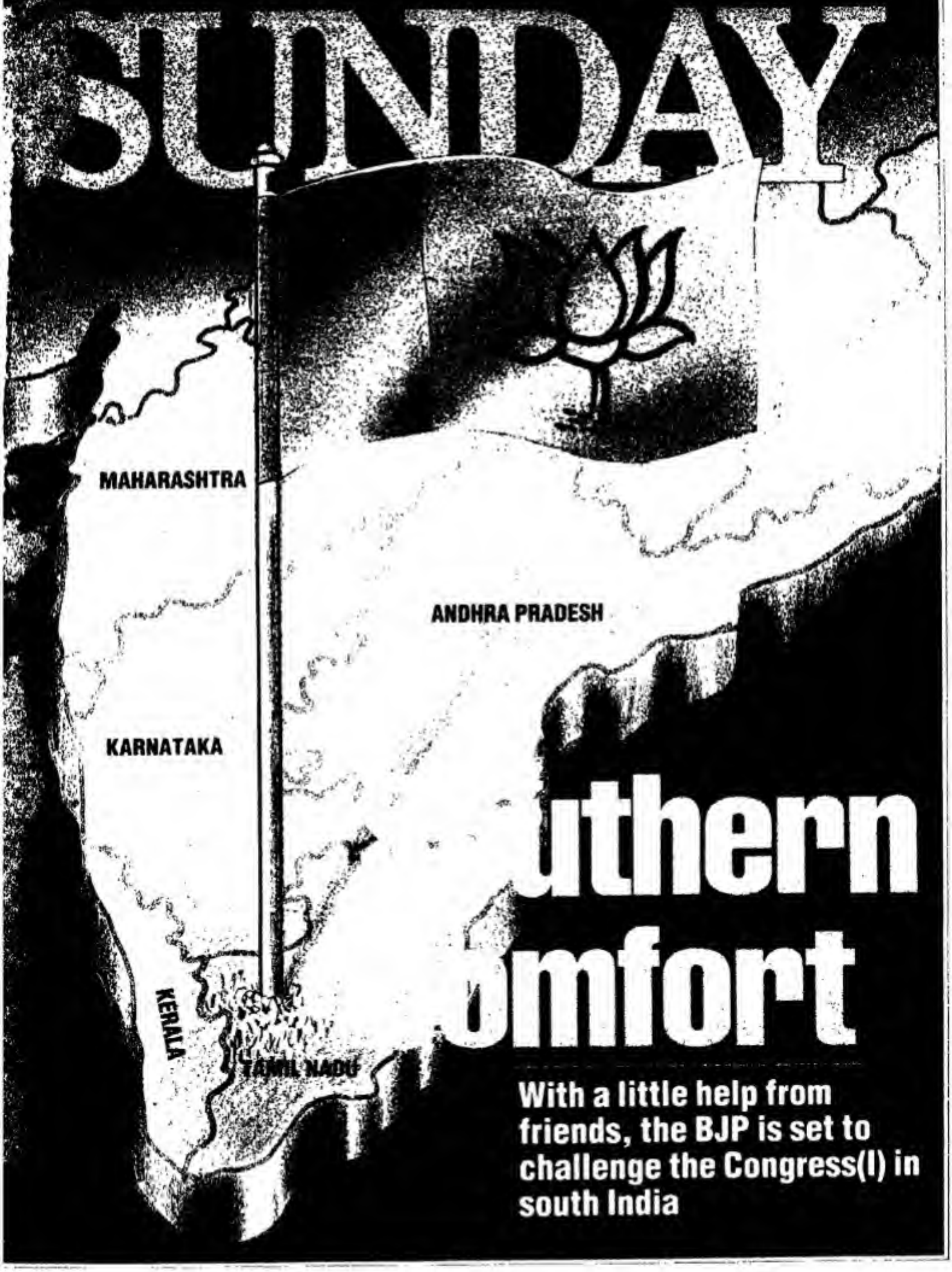
THE SHREWDEST POLITICIANS IN INDIA

SUNDAY



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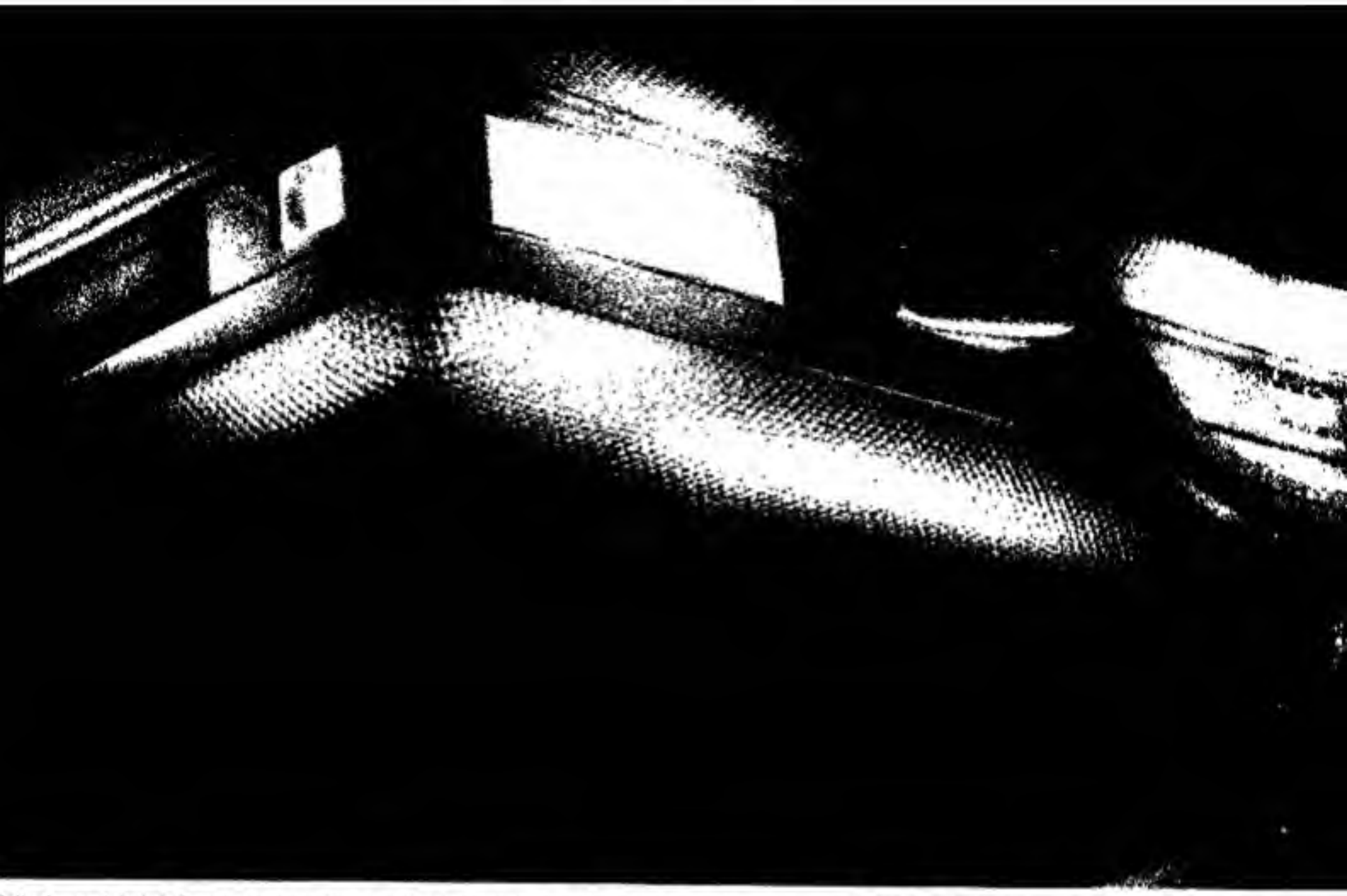
With a little help from friends, the BJP is set to challenge the Congress(I) in south India



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The Mehndi magic

Daler Mehndi is the undisputed king of Punjabi pop

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Game nobody wins

Your cover story, *Zero sum game* (14—20 December) was right in pointing out that 'India is heading towards another fractured Lok Sabha'. With all the political parties busy formulating strategies for the mid-term poll, it is most unlikely that any single party would be able to form the government.

As political expediency rather than ideology is the order of the day, voters are too confused to give a clear mandate. So the most logical outcome is another hung Parliament with the strangest of bedfellows cobbling up coalitions of convenience.

This may suit them fine but what about the man in the street who is at the mercy of unworthy leaders?How long will he keep paying the price for being an Indian?

T. Sashibhushan, Jaipur (Rajasthan)

■Thanks for your cover story, *Zero sum game*. In our tepid times another rounds of poll can at least raise some heat and dust.

The West will take some interest in the Great Indian Circus where the politician plays the clown while the press serves as cheerleader.

If the nation bears the cost of *tamasha*, it does because it deserves nothing better.

S.Chandraswamy, Bangalore (Karnataka)

Pipe dream, Congress style

Congressmen are living in a fools paradise if they think Sonia Gandhi will campaign for the Congress (*Sonia factor* , 30 November—6 December).

When Kesri became Congress president, the partywas a half-dead horse. And on becoming Congress president, Kesri went the whole hog to pack the party ranks with his henchmen. So Sonia is the last person now to touch it with a barge pole.

Sonia Gandhi: saviour on the horizon?

Kesri has implored Sonia a hundred times, but the Lady of Janpath has maintained a mystical silence on campaigning for the party.

It's a pity that while Kesri genuflects before Sonia she remains firm on her avowed stand.

Devi Vyas, Puri (Orissa)

No act of kindness

This refers to your book review, *This land is my land* (23—29 November). Kushwant Singh says Iqbal Masud has made a deliberate choice to stay on in post-Partition India. One fails to see what is so great about this decision.

If this were to be an act of great charity and magnanimity, then what about those who split India in the name of Islam? In the 1946 general election almost 86 per cent of Indian Muslims voted for Pakistan. The percentage was as high as 76 even in Madras.

The "two sides of the coin" should be seen in their historical perspective. It may be convenient for present day intellectuals to forget the lessons of history. but while there is reason to suspect the patriotism of Iqbal Masud and his likes, but this country does not consist of Iqbal Masud alone.

Partition is a thing of the past, but how come pre-Partition demands like proportional representation in jobs, police and the army for Muslims are raised in divided India? This pre-Partition mentality is an anachronism in free India and has nothing to justify itself. One only hopes the likes of Iqbal Masud become role models for their brethern.

P.R. Sharma, Patna (Bihar)

No sacrificial lamb

In the story, *In the Dock* (23—29 November) DMK leader M. Karunanidhi said all political parties and personalities have connived with the LTTE and that he should not be singled out.

He might be right. But the truth is: the DMK's contribution to the LTTE's growth in Tamil Nadu has been greater than others . The Jain Commission, therefore, cannot be faulted for pointing out such unpalatable facts.

When the IPKF was fighting the LTTE in Sri Lanka, Karunanidhi's government was treating wounded Tigers in Tamil Nadu hospitals. Not just that, Justice Jain also charged the DMK regime with supplying arms and ammunition to the LTTE thus fighting a proxy war against the IPKF. If these are not anti-national acts, what are?

The Congress tirade against the DMK too is prompted more by the tussles within itself than any genuine outrage. Chidambaram is another man indicted by Justice Jain. Why hasn't the Congress called for action against him? And what about R.K. Dhawan allegedly indicted by the Thakkar Commission in the Indira Gandhi assassination case? .

N.Prasad, New Delhi

Nation first

Your special report, *Hour of reckoning* (16—22 November) quotes Siddhartha Phukan saying "Mahanta might be successful in containing ULFA, but

he will not be able to save his political career ultimately."

If Phukan's prophesy comes true, nothing will suit the country better. The ULFA is a secessionist outfit fighting for an independent Assam and is trying its best to strike at India's territorial integrity. It's gone even to the extent of seeking ISI's help for money and arms. Elsewhere in the country, it

Prafulla Mahanta: Captain courageous!

has forged links with Kashmiri militants, Punjabi extremists, the NSCN in Nagaland, the PWG in Andhra Pradesh and the LTTE in the south.

If only Mahanta could contain the ULFA, the nation would hail him as a hero. It might make him lose his job as CM, but that would be a small sacrifice considered in the broader context of national integrity.

L.Rohini, Tiruchy (Tamil Nadu)

Biased view

This refers to the story, *Lonely patriarch* (9—15 November). It was very unfair of you to say that there is opposition within the BJP to Vajpayee becoming Prime Minister for a second time.

The Press has made much of Govindacharya's alleged remarks about Vajpayee. Both Govindacharya and Vajpayee are basically RSS Pracharaks loaned to the BJP. So why should the press make insinuations? The British High Commission has already clarified that Govindacharya never called Vajpayee the 'mask' of the BJP.

So, who is the press working for?

L.Sitalakshmi, Tiruppattur (Tamil Nadu)

The end is near?

I couldn't help laughing on reading Rajdeep Sardesai's *Peanut politics* (7—13 December). Nobody will weep over the death of the Congress as it has not only ruined the nation but has tarnished the image of Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru and Sardar Patel.

Those selfish leaders who think the Congress has the divine right to rule should stop shouting *Sonia Lao Desh Bachao*. They simply don't realise that if Sonia campaigns, it will only sully her name.

Everybody knows that the LTTE is after her blood. The recent demand that the three DMK ministers be dropped has only compounded matters. And once Sonia Gandhi decides to campaign for the Congress, the opposition parties will surely stoke the largely-forgotten Bofors issue.

So, these selfish leaders should leave her alone and let her carry on social work for the poor and down-trodden.

Dayaldas V.K., Bombay (Maharashtra)

Sitaram Kesri: the last straw

■Rajdeep Sardesai has rightly said in *Peanut politics* that no other party is in worse shape than Sitaram Kesri's Congress.

A close analysis of the events following 15 August 1947 will show that the Congress, which had a halo about it, thanks to its role in the country's struggle for freedom, was in a very bad shape in 1947 for having accepted Partition despite earlier assurances to the contrary.

Only the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi saved the party. The absence of any viable alternative too helped it. However, instead of building up the party and fulfilling the various promises, the leadership went on cashing in on its goodwill.

Now that it has exhausted this goodwill, the end would have come in the eighties itself. But the assassinations of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 gave it a fresh lease of life. That explains the desperate SOS to Sonia Gandhi to get the party out of the woods.

V.Segar, New Delhi

Contributed by Mangala Ramachandran, Indore (Madhya Pradesh)

Gossip silly and sour

It's possible that there is a readership for story and gossip about celebrities and their private lives. It makes sound business sense to write about the recent quarrel between Rishi Kapoor and Neetu Singh (*Bollywood masala* ,23 — 29 November).

But can't *Media Musings* keep to less frivolous stuff? For, film stars and their wayward ways, if glamourised, can only generate false images liable to mislead and ruin youngsters.

S.Helen, Ithalar (Tamil Nadu)

MILESTONES

APPOINTED: T.P. Sitaram, as press secretary to President K.R. Narayanan, on 19 December. Sitaram is a 1980-batch IFS officer and he succeeded Ranjit Rao.

HONOURED: author Mahashweta Devi, sitar exponent Annapurna Devi and Rabindra Sangeet exponent Suchitra Mitra, with Deshikottama by the Visva-Bharati University.

RESIGNED: Mani Shankar Aiyar, former MP, from the

Congress party on 18 December. Also resigned from the party was former Andhra Pradesh chief minister N. Bhaskara Rao.

INSTITUTED: by the central government, the Bharat Samman award to honour foreign nationals and NRIs who have contributed towards fostering understanding of India abroad.

APPOINTED: Jairam Ramesh, officer on special duty with Union finance ministry, as joint secretary of the All India Congress Committee, on 18 December.

ADJUDGED: Hindustan Lever, as India's leading company for the third consecutive year, in an annual survey of corporate leadership, conducted by the *Far Eastern Economic*

SUDHIR TAILANG/THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

■ I shall make all efforts to ensure the victory of the Prime Minister from Bihar.

LALOO PRASAD YADAV, *former Bihar chief minister, urging I.K. Gujral to contest the forthcoming elections from Bihar*

■ I belong to the original Congress of Gandhi, Nehru, Indira and Rajiv. I don't believe in Sitaram Kesri's Congress.

MAMATA BANERJEE, *Trinamul Congress leader from West Bengal*

■ It is an ethical and moral question on which we took this decision because we want to defeat the corrupt Congress.

NAVIN PATNAIK, *leader of the breakaway Janata Dal faction in Orissa*

■ **Any favourable treatment to a political party is bound to damage the credibility or impartiality of the Election Commission which is trusted by the nation to be fair and impartial.**

G.V.G. KRISHNAMURTHY, *election commissioner*

■ It is in accordance with the wishes of the people that the AIADMK and the BJP have come together.

J. JAYALALITHA, *AIADMK leader, announcing her party's poll alliance with the BJP in Tamil Nadu*

■ I'm not aware of any controversy. I am happy to have won the title in the 50th year of Independence. It is as much your pride as mine.

DIANA HAYDEN, *reigning Miss World, after arriving in Hyderabad*

■ I've never been unfaithful in a relationship. I'm a one-woman man.

BOBBY DEOL, *film star*

SEEN

A KIND OF LIFE

For 13-year-old Rani, it's a question of looking ahead

PRAKASH HATVALNE

INNOCENCE AS ANODYNE: *Rani with her teddy*

The teddy bear has no memory of the night. Nor has Rani. When the gas disaster struck Bhopal on 2 December, 1984, Rani was a two-month-old. The hospitals were choking with groaning, gasping, dying men and women struggling for a whiff of fresh air. It was a doctor who spotted her in the crowd.

That was thirteen years ago. And Rani was only one of the six children spotted. She was the youngest. The others were between four and six and could, at least, speak. The government later handed them over to the Mahila Chetna Manch, an NGO run by former chief secretary Mrs Nirmala Buch.

Today, a seventh standard student, Rani wants to be a doctor. "I want to serve the poor," she says. "I am going to help gas victims." Innocence can be anodyne when you are oblivious of the perils of life. Probably, she has been inspired by the others. Rajesh, now 20, has joined the Border Security Force, while 19-year-old Ganga works in a beauty parlour. One of the six was lucky. The Manch sought out her parents. While yet another is into garments with an uncle. The sixth died.

The Manch means a lot to the 13-year-old girl. She now lives in Kalyani, a working women's hostel run by the Manch. Kusum Arondaker, the vice-president of the Manch, has a fuller memory of the disaster and its aftermath. "When Rani was brought to the hostel she was a cute little child," recalls Arondaker. "We found an ayah, Kamala Rai, to look after her."

Rai was like a mother to her. For ten long years she looked after her, the little 'Gas Rani' as she was called. It was only three years ago that Rani began having a room to herself. Her foster mother lives in a colony on Bhopal's outskirts.

Kamala had even thought of adopting Rani but wasn't allowed. To the orphaned child who shares her birthday with Gandhiji, Kamala is, still, her mum. "Mummy visits me once in a while. I had even been to Lucknow once with her."

There was one more lady to whom Rani was very attached. That was Kusum Bhagdekar, former secretary of the Manch, who died three years ago. Now it's Mrs Arondaker who looks after her. Looking after her also means being sensitive to the girl's state. "Most of the time her face is a blank, and mind lost in reverie," she says. "This is the problem with a child who grows up feeling insecure."

Maybe, that's why when she's asked who she is closest to, Rani names her classmate Amrita. Maybe, she's scared of the grown-up world of prying laywers and impassive judges who never tire of asking Rani the same old questions. The questions are invariably about her parents, for, relief claims have to be settled. "Had I known their names, I would have told the judges much earlier," she says. It's a pity that no one seems to realise that. •

Deshdeep Saxena/Bhopal

Maybe, she's scared of the grown-up world of prying laywers and impassive judges who never tire of asking her the same old questions

The Kesri curse

Will Sonia Gandhi intervene and break the jinx?

It was a day of mixed fortunes for the Congress president. In the morning, he kicks off the campaign. Addressing a Youth Congress rally in Bhubaneswar, Sitaram Kesri coined the party's election slogan: *arthik swaraj aur garibon ka raj* (economic independence and rule of the poor). At a time when there was little difference between the secular and the communal forces, it made good sense to put the secular image of the party on to the back burner and fight the election on an improvised *garibi hatao* platform.

For once, the crowd listened without interrupting his speech with cries of *Sonia lao, desh bachao*. Clearly, J.B. Patnaik, the chief minister of Orissa, knew how to organise rallies.

But Kesri's good mood was not destined to last long. News of a press conference in Delhi reached him. He was told that Mani Shankar Aiyar, the former MP from Mayiladuthurai in Tamil Nadu, had 'disassociated' himself from the party, blaming Kesri for the BJP-AIADMK alliance in the state. Mincing no words, Aiyar called Kesri a 'narrow-minded north Indian' who had neglected the south.

When Kesri was told this, he merely said, "As party president I have to tolerate many things." And lapsed into sullen silence. It was not Aiyar's loss that he mourned. Rather the press conference told him two things. One, that the BJP-AIADMK alliance had thrown the state Congressmen into panic. On its own, the party's state unit has no representatives either in the Parliament or the Assembly. The party also fared badly in the local body elections. It was in no shape to fight the polls on its own.

Second, Kesri knew that Aiyar, a known Sonia loyalist, would not have taken such an extreme step without consulting 10 Janpath. As Aiyar himself clarified later, "I spoke to her (Sonia) and she did not discourage me from doing what I was going to do."

It is probably the second reason that upset Kesri more than the first.

In the recent past, more and more Congressmen have been making a beeline to 10 Janpath.

Arjun Singh, as is typical of him, has already written a letter to Kesri asking him to call a Congress Working Committee meeting, so that they could pass a resolution asking Sonia to lead the party. Party vice-president Jitendra Prasada has also indicated that this is something that has his approval. Aiyar added fuel to the fire burning in Kesri's breast by remarking that the Congress president was an unlettered, incompetent person who had yet to read Arjun Singh's letter.

In the end, all that Congressmen have to go to the electorate with are of course posters of the Gandhi dynasty and the hope that Rajiv's widow will campaign in their favour

In fact, 10 Janpath has become the place of pilgrimage for any Congressman unhappy with the party president. Jagannath Mishra, who has floated a rival unit in Bihar, has added his entreaties to Singh's. And Mamata Banerjee went one step further. She parodied the slogan (ironically coined by Kesri himself) of '*Sonia lao, desh bachao*' to '*Kesri bhagao, Congress bachao*'. Of late, she has emerged as one of Sonia Gandhi's rising loyalists.

Which is probably why Kesri had got so fed up of the '*Sonia lao*' brigade that

he lashed out at the loyalists in the last CWC meeting on 12 December. "*Humse burra loyalist kaun hai* (Who is a bigger loyalist than I)?" he asked. "*Kuch logon ko adhyaksh banne ke liye laal tapak rahi hai* (Some people are doing this out of greed to become Congress president)," he muttered ominously.

Kesri had reason to worry. In the Mamata Banerjee versus Somen Mitra feud, Sonia did not play the role of a disinterested observer but actually intervened to placate Mamata. She summoned the fiery Bengal leader to Delhi and told both Banerjee and Mitra that she did not want to see her late husband's party disintegrate.

Sitaram Kesri: "I have to tolerate many things"

Later, it was because of her intervention that Mamata did not leave the party, but agreed to negotiate with AICC general secretary Oscar Fernandes. (Earlier, when Fernandes had travelled to Calcutta for the sole purpose of talking to Mamata, she had made him wait and spoke to him only before the press).

Of course it is another matter that she gave Fernandes the impression that she would call on the Congress president the next day; but instead left for Calcutta without paying any visit. She did, however, find the time for a late-night meeting with Sonia Gandhi before she left.

This is the first time that Sonia has played such an active and publicised role in party politics. And it has spurred dissidents like Arjun Singh and Co. to pressurise Kesri into requesting Sonia to take over the party's leadership.

THE SONIA BRIGADE

Arjun Singh: Prides himself as the ultimate loyalist — but no one is fooled. He forced Sitaram Kesri to take a hard line on the Jain Commission (interim) report and withdraw support. The ostensible reason was that he was doing it for Sonia Gandhi. But as everyone knew, Singh was merely impatient to win his Lok Sabha seat back.

Again, he has conveniently forgotten that it was Kesri who brought him back into the Congress after he split the party. Instead, he has once again resorted to writing letters to the party president demanding that he ask Sonia to lead the party.

H.K.L. Bhagat: Actually danced for his supper outside Madam's gate on her birthday. SidelSidelined by Kesri, he is another one who sees the mid-term polls as a chance to win back his Lok Sabha seat. Only he is not sure if the party will give him a ticket. Which is why he doorstepped 10 Janpath.

Not content with distributing *laddoos* to party workers, Bhagat also hired a band from Karol Bagh and danced a jig.

Mani Shankar Aiyar: Literally ekes out a living by being a Sonia loyalist. In fact, it is very easy to predict Aiyar's reaction to most situations: if it's something good, he'll credit Sonia for it. And if it's bad, then of course he'll blame P. Chidambaram.

In Aiyar's defence it must be said that there are no devious ambitions attached to his loyalty — unlike Arjun Singh.

Mamata Banerjee: She ran to Sonia to come to her aid to solve her ongoing feud with Kesri and West Bengal PCC chief Somen Mitra. It seems as if Sonia is ready to bestir herself on Mamata's behalf. As a result, Mamata and Mitra are fighting a proxy war between Sonia and Kesri.

And it suits the firebrand to claim that she is not a product of Kesri's Congress. Rather, she prefers to be identified with the Gandhi name.

Jitendra Prasada: Clambered on to Arjun Singh's bandwagon by holding press conferences. He is also demanding that Sonia lead the party.

It is not too difficult to see what he would gain by throwing in his lot with the loyalists. He knows he doesn't have much of a future in the Congress under Kesri. And he would need 10 Janpath's blessings if he wants to grab Kesri's job.

As it is, the BJP has targeted the Congress for not offering its voters a prime ministerial candidate. As much as Kesri would like to see his face plastered on posters all over, he knows that he would pale in comparison to Atal Behari Vajpayee. Besides, Sonia is still to indicate whether she will campaign or not.

In fact, this silence has encouraged the Opposition so much that the BJP's probable candidate from Amethi, Sanjay Singh, who was acquitted of the Syed Modi murder, boldly stated in an interview recently, "As far as the electorate is concerned, the people of Amethi will give her an adequate answer."

Since Madam is not forthcoming, Congressmen can do little about the challenge. Except to wait and watch whether Arjun Singh's letter politicking has had the desired effect. But if someone like Sanjay Singh is now issuing challenges to Sonia Gandhi, then indeed the party is in a sorry state.

What is baffling is that apart from pleading and performing jigs outside 10 Janpath there is little else the party is doing to prepare itself for the coming elections. The few coalitions they are cobbling together may help the party win seats at the Centre, but will do little to enthuse the morale of the workers at the local level.

Mamata Banerjee and Somen Mitra: fighting a proxy war?

In Bihar, for instance, it is clear that Laloo Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal would demand a lion's share of the tickets. So, with only two seats in the Lok Sabha at present, Kesri is hardly in a position to argue. All he can do is tell party workers who call on him is that "dil par patthar rakh kar kaam karo (Put a stone on your hearts and work for whichever candidate)".

In fact, as a CWC member pointed out that this time the Congress will probably contest the lowest number of seats ever, since it is planning to leave 25 per cent for its allies; which in effect works out to 400 out of the 543 Lok Sabha seats.

And though the coordination committee meets on a regular basis, it is still to come out with a comprehensive agenda, except that Kesri would be the party's chief campaigner. Somehow that didn't have quite the desired effect.

In the end, all that Congressmen have to go to the electorate with are of course posters of the Gandhi dynasty and the hope that Rajiv's widow will campaign in their favour. •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

INDER MALHOTRA

The peacemakers

India and Pakistan must move towards a sane nuclear policy

A major new policy announcement by Pakistan on the vexed nuclear issue deserves much greater attention than it has received at the time of writing. For, the declaration by the Pakistani foreign minister, Gauhar Ayub Khan, that his country would not sign the CTBT "even if India does so" has at long last blown up one of the most disingenuous posturings on a question of paramount importance.

Up to now, the Pakistani position had been that it would sign the CTBT or any other nuclear treaty, including the NPT, but only after India had first affixed its signatures on the dotted line. Islamabad could go on reciting this mantra by rote, as its international interlocutors kept reminding it, safe in the knowledge that "its bluff would never be called". Now the pretence is over, and the subcontinent has an opportunity to move towards a sane nuclear policy built into the nuclear realities of the world and the region.

It can, of course, be argued that nothing much has changed because all that Pakistan has done is to bring its officially stated policy in line with what has always been, at least since 1987 when Pakistan went nuclear, its actual policy. Indeed, responsible Pakistani spokespersons have never hesitated to tell the truth in the course of Track Two (semi-official) diplomacy with this country, to say nothing of their conversations with countries like the United States.

The matter was put succinctly by Agha Shahi, a former foreign minister and a veteran member of the Pakistani ruling establishment, quite some time ago. There was no way, he had said, Pakistan could give up its nuclear capability because nuclear weapons alone could overcome the "overwhelming and irremediable Indian conventional superiority".

Even more remarkable are the statements, both private and public, of Mushahid Hussain, Pakistan's information minister, a staunch advocate of Pakistani nuclear weaponry. He has bluntly said a number of times that peace has been preserved between India and Pakistan for more than a quarter of a century only because of the "unstated nuclear balance".

In other words, small but credible nuclear deterrents on both sides of the subcontinental divide are a "stabilising element", not instruments of a catastrophic nuclear exchange between the two neighbours. This much is acknowledged also by many Americans, except those fundamentalists who have a vested interest in spreading the canard that South Asia is a dangerous "flashpoint" of a nuclear holocaust.

Now that the Pakistani nuclear approach has been clarified, there is no reason why New Delhi and Islamabad should not embark on fashioning a series of confidence-building and nuclear-restraint measures that would obviate the danger of brinkmanship because of misinformation, misunderstanding, miscalculation or accident.

A nuclear plant in India: a new direction?

New Delhi and Islamabad should embark on a series of confidence-building and nuclear-restraint measures that would obviate the danger of brinkmanship because of misinformation, misunderstanding, miscalculation or accident

The key question is: why has Pakistan decided to come clean about its nuclear policy only now and not earlier? Of the possible answers to it, the most important is that policy-makers in Islamabad are worried about the written assurances China has had to give America to the effect that Chinese nuclear cooperation with Pakistan would cease. They therefore want to stand on their own feet.

Also, the Pakistani economy being in a perilous state, it is only behind a nuclear shield that Pakistan can keep its defence expenditure to the level it can afford. •

SURVIVAL OF THE SHREWDEST

Portraits of four great crisis managers in contemporary Indian politics

They are lampooned, reviled, hated, criticised. And yet, every now and then, people throng to hear their speeches, repose trust in them and vote them to positions of responsibility.

For their parties, they're firefighters; for their enemies, they're fixers. But their talents are called upon every time there is a crisis, simply because they're known to survive all crises, through cunning, clout or simply being thick-skinned.

Profiling the four greatest survivors of politics today.

Bhairon Singh Shekhawat

Bhairon Singh Shekhawat: BJP's man for all seasons

The 74-year-old chief minister of Rajasthan is the Bharatiya Janata Party's man for all seasons. Last time when Kalyan Singh needed the numbers to prove majority in Uttar Pradesh after Mayawati pulled out support, it was Shekhawat who was called in to avert the crisis.

It took precisely 24 hours for the BJP with Shekhawat at the helm of affairs to break the Congress and the Bahujan Samaj Party to prove majority on the floor of the House.

The situation was no different at the Centre. When I.K. Gujral's government [illegible]ering and heading for a fall, the [illegible]alled in Shekhawat to help it with [illegible]. However, its bid to form the

government at the Centre failed, according to party sources, because "Shekhawat did not try hard enough".

And why didn't he try hard enough?

Party general secretary Pramod Mahajan had been assigned the demolition job while Shekhawat was there to monitor events. Shekhawat would have delivered, had Mahajan done his job.

But when things did not work out the way the BJP wanted them to, Shekhawat didn't hang around in Delhi. He packed his bags and returned to Jaipur.

A Rajput by caste, Shekhawat was initially in the police force, later joined politics and entered the Rajasthan Assembly on a Jana Sangh ticket way back in 1952. Shekhawat has been CM for three terms. And everyone agrees that his biggest assets are his excellent PR skills and the ability to keep Opposition leaders happy. Shekhawat learnt, early in life, how important it is to be on good terms with everybody.

Shekhawat first showed his talents when Mohan Lal Sukhadia became chief minister of Rajasthan. At that time, though the Congress was comfortably placed in the Assembly having won 82 seats out of 160, Sukhadia recognised the abilities of a young man from the Jana Sangh who, though having only eight seats under his belt, told Sukhadia confidently that he could be relied upon

They're firefighters for their parties and they are called upon every time there is a crisis because they're known to survive through cunning, clout or being thick-skinned

Digvijay Singh: the archetypal politician

for support.

"Each time Sukhadia had to fix a rebellious Congress MLA he would leak allegations against him to Shekhawat who would then raise a question in the House to embarrass him (the MLA)," narrates a Congress MP from Rajasthan. Not only was this a way of building up IOUs, but Shekhawat also learnt how to be the consummate gambler: how to play for high stakes with empty pockets.

In Rajasthan, the Fifties and the Sixties saw the stranglehold of the Lok Dal. Despite being a Rajput, Shekhawat managed to win over the Jats and other agricultural castes and expand the base of the Jana Sangh. Ask a politician and he'll tell you how difficult this is — not only do you have to win over communities from other parties, you have to convert them to your way of thinking.

Shekhawat did this, admittedly with a little help from his friends. The Jana Sangh got just eight Assembly seats in 1972. It got between six and 12 per cent of the votes between 1952 and 1972. However, thanks to Shekhawat's efforts and tactics, the BJP progressively increased its votes in every election from 18.6 per cent in 1980 to 37.6 per cent in 1993.

The BJP can keep on saying that alliances have always harmed its electoral base. Maybe the party is right. In the states, strategic alliances have helped its partners much more than they have benefited the BJP.

But this is not true of Rajasthan. Here, the BJP broadened its base by collaborating with the Janata Party in 1977 and taking away all the Jat votes from the others

Who's up, who's down

Four others who matter

Pramod Mahajan: He is the BJP's rising star, especially now that the BJP has given up its pretence of honest politicking and does not mind playing dirty so long as that gets it the votes.

Mahajan's first breakthrough came when he helped Shekhawat to break the state Congress in Uttar Pradesh. Although he was not lucky in Delhi, he made up by engineering a split in the Janata Dal in Orissa. As a state JD leader pointed out, the party agreed only after Mahajan assured them of adequate seats and funds for campaign.

Even within the party, Mahajan has survived — despite the fact that he has often switched camps from L.K. Advani to Atal Behari Vajpayee's, and back again.

Suresh Kalmadi: After Rajiv Gandhi's death, he emerged as Sharad Pawar's back-room boy. Only, he failed to secure a prime ministership for his leader. When Narasimha Rao took over as Congress president, Kalmadi soon became a Rao loyalist.

However, he has not been to make much headway with Sitaram Kesri's camp. In fact, his party ticket fot the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections is also in danger, thanks to his latest escapade — he tried to break the Congress to join the BJP, but failed to muster the adequate numbers.

Harkishen Singh Surjeet: He is not called the Red Rasputin for no reason. Both, when the Deve Gowda government fell and now when I.K. Gujral has been toppled by the Congress, Surjeet has played the role of a stumbling block.

Earlier, he wanted Mulayam Singh Yadav to become Prime Minister, and later allowed himself to be 'persuaded' on Gujral's candidature. This time round, he did not support Mulayam Singh even though the latter was keen to become Prime Minister with Congress support. Surjeet, instead, was keen on elections.

And with another hung Parliament in the offing, Surjeet's role can only become diabolic.

Ghulam Nabi Azad: Always spotted in photographs as the man standing next to the Congress president, whoever that might be. However, during the recent party elections, Azad slipped up when he supported Pawar instead of Kesri.

Since then, he has tried to ingratiate himself with Kesri. But he is still to gain ground.

in alliance, leading to a straight fight between the BJP and the Congress.

Not that this has been easy. Too busy making friends in other parties, Shekhawat occasionally forgot that he had his own party to take care of. As a result, last year when he was away in the US for treatment, others used his absence to try and supplant him. They came to grief. Within half a day of his return, he had the crisis sorted out.

Shekhawat's source of strength is that in addition to politicians, he considers the bureaucracy his constituency as well. Last month when the irrigation minister, Devi Singh Bhati, was accused of assaulting a senior IAS officer, P.K. Deb, Shekhawat won the battle by asking Bhati to resign before he could be dismissed. Bhati was happy because he was told he had been saved from the disgrace of being expelled from the party; and the IAS lobby was even more pleased, for here was a chief minister who believed in fair play.

Shekhawat has been a smooth operator. However, in sticky situations such as the sati episode of Roop Kanwar, he had saved his skin by maintaining a stoic silence. For that matter, even on the Ayodhya issue till date people are not very clear on what his stand is.

The fact that Shekhawat has managed to keep his critics and opponents happy along with his friends says something about the man. However, social workers and activists in Rajasthan have been his bitter critics. Lack of development and rise in crime against women is what has left them angry.

But that has not really left Shekhawat too disturbed. He knows that with elections round the corner, his importance within the party will only increase.

Digvijay Singh

The Madhya Pradesh chief minister looks like a mild-mannered professor, but the only lessons he's given are to teach the Digvijay Singh Way of Getting Ahead, i.e. how to stab your mentor in the back, and get away with it.

But then, he in turn has had an excellent teacher.

Before Arjun Singh inducted him into the Congress, Digvijay was more inclined towards the Jana Sangh. However, because of the former's patronage, the younger man was made not only an MLA but also the general secretary of the state Youth Congress. An impressio-

nable Digvijay learnt fast and soon began to be known as the No. 2 man in the state Congress.

So when Arjun Singh became chief minister in 1980, he did not hesitate to make his protege a minister with Cabinet rank. Again, in 1985, when Arjun Singh was sent off by Rajiv Gandhi as Governor of Punjab, he ensured that Digvijay was made the Pradesh Congress Committee chief in his absence.

And later, when the time came to choose a Congress chief minister in 1993, Arjun Singh, aided and abetted by Kamal Nath, made sure that it was Digvijay who got the Congress Legislature Party's support, although his pre-poll commitment had been to instal an OBC or a tribal as CM. As a result, the older Singh ended up antagonising other regional Congress leaders such as Madhavrao Scindia, Subhash Yadav, Ajit Jogi and the Shukla brothers (both VC and SC).

All for the love of a man called Digvijay Singh.

Digvijay's political rise and Arjun Singh's role in it are directly linked. And this makes the magnitude of the younger man's betrayal even greater. At the end of it, however, the balance sheet is still in Digvijay's favour — for not only has he survived but he has made sure that it is Arjun Singh who is in his debt. And not the other way round.

When Arjun Singh started challenging the then Prime Minister and Congress president, Narasimha Rao — both on the issues of 'one man one post' and the demolition of Babri Masjid — Digvijay knew that he had to choose between the man who installed him as chief minister and the one who would ensure that he stayed there. So, instead of giving any firm commitment, he convinced both that he was "actually on his side".

Later, when Arjun Singh split the party to form Congress(T), Digvijay assured him that he would be of more use to him inside the Congress. And the former agreed as he had no choice.

At the same time, the chief minister convinced Rao that if the Congress president wanted a foil for Arjun Singh, then who better than another

Arjun Singh: betrayed by his protege?

Rajput from Madhya Pradesh?

The same argument worked with the next party president despite Sitaram Kesri's preference for Subhash Yadav as the next chief minister.

In fact, Digvijay's politicking has become a joke in Delhi. During the organisational elections, he told Sharad Pawar that the Maratha had his vote; and the next day, he also told Kesri the same thing. Remarked an observer Digvijay has told the UNI he's with Kesri and the PTI that he's with Pawar.

The remarkable thing about Digvijay is, there is no evidence that he's shared largesse of riches with anyone. He hasn't put out the lure of office to anyone. He's just watched his mentor Arjun Singh drowning and made a big deal of throwing a straw at him when he was gasping for breath.

Politics is the art of doing what everyone thinks is impossible. Digvijay Singh should be proud of being a master at it.

Chandrababu Naidu

He was the wrong man in the wrong party. When he joined politics, Chandrababu Naidu was a Congressman. He married N.T. Rama Rao's daughter, became the *alludugaru* (son-in-law) of one of Andhra Pradesh's most popular actors, joined the Telugu Desam Party becoming its general secretary and then dethroned his father-in-law, becoming the chief minister of the state

Devious enough for you?

That isn't the last of it. When the time came in 1996 for the people of Andhra Pradesh to choose between NTR's grieving widow and his ingrate of a son-in-law, they voted for Naidu

And after all that, Chandrababu Naidu is considered one of the most efficient chief ministers in India today. It stands to reason.

"I believe in performance charisma," said Naidu in an interview shortly after he had won 16 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in the state for the United Front. (Now the tally stands at 17.)

That, and a little bit of manipulative politics.

He was able to perform because he

Chandrababu Naidu refused to be Prime Minister and preferred to play kingmaker. It is largely due to his role as convener that the front is still united

had his finger firmly on the pulse of the electorate. Few remember, but he was the brain behind the more popular of NTR's schemes, such as the Rs 2-per-kg rice. Later, when he became chief minister, he realised that an able administration made for a more than adequate substitute for *filmi* charisma.

It is his ability to anticipate the needs of the moment that came in handy during the post-poll alliances in 1996. All it took was a question during a television interview to launch the idea of forming a fourth front, a loose coalition of regional parties with Naidu at the helm.

At the time, none of the existing combinations — the National Front-Left Front, the BJP and the Congress were in a position to form the government. Naidu worked on the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Asom Gana Parishad (who were keen to support the BJP) and the Tamil Maanila Congress (which was not keen on the Left) to support the NF-LF.

In effect, Naidu replaced V.P. Singh's National Front with the United Front.

As an architect, he knew the weak points. In spite of popular demand, he refused to be Prime Minister, preferring instead to play kingmaker. And as the UF convener, it is largely thanks to his efforts that the front is still united.

Once Deve Gowda was removed, it was Naidu who persuaded the other pretenders to the throne to agree on a consensus on I.K. Gujral. He knew that a man without a base would be less threatening than a Mulayam Singh Yadav or a G K. Moopanar. (Both these could easily dump the UF and do a deal with the Congress later)

Again, when the Gujral government fell, it was Naidu who stemmed possible defections to the BJP and the Congress by getting all 13 partners to give a written undertaking that they would not support either the Congress or the BJP.

And with a hung Parliament in the offing, Naidu knows that he has more of the same ahead of him. In the run-up to the elections, he has to ensure that all its constituents stay united. Later, he'll again play kingmaker

The fringe benefits of the job are many. As convener, it was Naidu's candidate Krishan Kant, who became the vice-president of India. Even Congress president Sitaram Kesri gave in to Naidu's choice because he didn't want to antagonise the UF convener. A few months later, he even managed to get his

V.P. Singh is one man who still creates panic in the enemy camp. In the era of coalition politics, a man with his talents will always be sought after

own man — former Reserve Bank of India governor C. Rangarajan — appointed as the Governor of Andhra Pradesh.

Not even the wily Harkishen Singh Surjeet got so much out of the UF government.

Which is why Naidu is so keen to see that the United Front stays united. His very survival on the national stage depends on this. Otherwise, Chandrababu Naidu is just another chief minister with his chunk of regional votes.

V.P. Singh

Right after Kalyan Singh had proved majority in Uttar Pradesh after Mayawati withdrew support from his government, V.P. Singh made an appearance before the media after a long bout of illness and confinement to bed. While photographers kept clicking, VP smiled politely at the cameras. *"Jab aap log*

camera hata dete hain to hum thoda khujli-vujli kar lete hain (When your cameras are not on then I get sometime to scratch and be at ease)," he joked.

An innocuous joke. But it says a lot about the man.

Vishwanath Pratap Singh, the former Prime Minister, has earned the reputation of a 'performer' over the years. The gap between what he says and what he does seems to be widening with every passing year. He says he does not like to be in the public eye and yet each time he goes to Apollo hospital in Delhi for his dialysis, his cronies make sure to inform journalists who then casually drop in to listen to the Raja.

If that does not make for a good copy there are painting exhibitions. Right after Singh announced his retirement from politics, the artist in him took over and there were exhibitions galore. And when the politician in him bounced back into action, sources in the Janata Dal say he was available for comment and consultation on Laloo Prasad Yadav (facing charges on the fodder scam) from London while being treated there. In fact, he made sure that he was consulted before any action was taken.

But that's not all. For V.P. Singh, the 'political guru' of the Janata Dal, has been known for political infidelity as well. He started his career way back in 1979 when he swore undying loyalty to Sanjay Singh, a close friend of Sanjay Gandhi. The Raja's reward: chief ministership of Uttar Pradesh.

However, this did not last long, once the Raja found his about old friends. And now each time there is a crisis at the Centre, Singh springs back to action.

A pro-Mandal rally: dissecting India's social fabric

Early this year, he floated the idea of a united secular front and met Congress president Sitaram Kesri. However, when the tension between the United Front and the Congress grew he dismissed the idea. "For me, the unity of the United Front is supreme," he said.

Singh played up the Mandal Commission report and was accused of dividing the society on caste lines. However, that made him the 'Mandal Messiah' — a fighter for social justice.

Consequently, each time there is a crisis and UF leaders run around like headless chicken, it's V.P. Singh they turn to. So much so that when the United Front was formed, he was the first choice as the prime ministerial candidate.

At a time when the whole political system is premised on winning friends and allies, V.P. Singh is one man who still creates fear and panic in the enemy camp. And as long as the era of coalition politics is on, a man with Singh's talents will only do well. •

Anuja Pande/New Delhi with Deshdeep Saxena/Bhopal and G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

Struggling For The South

Will the BJP manage to fill the space vacated by the Congress?

Mani Shankar Aiyar was angry. It was coming out of his ears. And this time there was no P. Chidambaram to blame. Although the Congress had begun negotiations with the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK), for some reason talks had not progressed. The result was that former chief minister Jayalalitha, in whom Sitaram Kesri had invested heavily, had done a deal with the BJP instead of the Congress.

And like the cuckolded husband, the Congress(I) — and Mani Shankar Aiyar — had been the last to know.

"Because of the ineptitude of Mr Sitaram Kesri, the BJP will get at least two seats from Tamil Nadu. Unless we change our leader, the Congress(I) is finished in Tamil Nadu. After the Ekta Yatra of Murli Manohar Joshi, the BJP increased the percentage of votes in Kerala and its destructiveness spilled over to Tamil Nadu. Now you will see more blasts like the one in Coimbatore," predicted Aiyar ominously. He announced his dissociation from the Congress(I) until some other leader took over the party — preferably Mrs Sonia Gandhi.

Till that happens the Congress(I) is indeed, as Aiyar so sagely observed, finished in Tamil Nadu. The space vacated by it is probably going to be filled by the BJP and other smaller, new parties. And in not just Tamil Nadu, in other states in south India as well, the BJP is poised to give the 106-year-old Congress(I) a run for its money.

Voice-Over

BJP leaders on the crucial alliances they hope to forge in three states

TAMIL NADU

Alliance with the AIADMK

L.K. Advani *(BJP president)*

"Jayalalitha is a political force in Tamil Nadu and we need to strengthen ourselves there. This alliance will work wonders in Tamil Nadu"

A.B. Vajpayee *(BJP's prime ministerial candidate)*

"We have joined hands with Jayalalitha to increase our strength there. We have to begin a new chapter and do not want to go back to old things. Keeping past experiences in mind we don't want to be prevented from serving the country. Jayalalitha's corruption charges? That's for the courts to decide"

L. Ganesan *(Tamil Nadu BJP general secretary)*

"With this alliance we have removed the stigma of untouchability. Corruption is an issue with the BJP but right now what people want more than anything is a stable government"

KARNATAKA

Alliance with Ramakrishna Hegde

Ananth Kumar *(Karnataka state president)*

"The Janata Dal has performed well only when H.D. Deve Gowda and Hegde have been together. This time the JD will be routed in the state. If our alliance with Hegde comes through, we will sweep in Karnataka"

Venkaiah Naidu *(BJP general secretary)*

"By forming an alliance with Hegde we hope to create a formidable front against the JD and the Congress. The BJP has been improving on its performance in the state and will do better this time with or without the alliance"

ANDHRA PRADESH

Alliance with Lakshmi Parvathi's TDP(NTR)

Bangaru Lakshman *(BJP vice-president)*

"Our alliance with Lakshmi Parvathi could be beneficial since there is a lot of dissidence within the TDP. Besides, the sympathy factor will go in her favour and the anti-establishment vote will also come to us"

LAKSHMI PARVATHI

Venkaiah Naidu *(BJP general secretary)*

"We want a three-cornered fight in Andhra Pradesh. Lakshmi Parvathi had 11 per cent vote in the last elections and she is likely to improve her performance. We have Vijaya Shanti (the film actress) as well who has already met Advaniji and will campaign for us" •

How the BJP managed the south is a story of cleverly-worded assurances, patiently-worked-out alliances and painstaking groundwork. The BJP has made many compromises. But these are no worse than those made by other parties in their quest for political power. And the BJP argues that once it comes to power at the Centre, all these aberrations will undergo self-correction.

For the moment, they say, we've done it.

In Tamil Nadu, politics has gone bizarre. The ADMK and the BJP have for company assorted smaller parties like the pan-Tamil Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) of Dr S. Ramdoss, LTTE-sympathiser V. Gopalaswami's Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), former bitter critic, now close friend, Subramaniam Swamy's Janata Party, and rebel Congressman V. Ramamurthy's Tamil Nadu Makkal Congress.

This makes for a weird cocktail of ideologies. Though heading a Dravidian party, Jayalalitha hasn't tried to hide her pro-Hindu upper-caste bias — a few years ago, L.K. Advani and the BJP got her whole-hearted support at a meeting of the National Integration Council held immediately after the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

The space vacated by the Congress in Tamil Nadu is probably going to be filled by the BJP and other smaller parties. And in other southern states as well, the BJP is poised to give the 106-year-old Congress(I) a run for its money

The BJP, which prides itself on its clean image has been lambasted for having allied with a leader who is being tried in a dozen or so corruption cases.

Subramaniam Swamy was a constant baiter of the man the BJP is projecting as Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, when he was in the Janata Party

V. Ramamurthy swears by the Nehru-Gandhi family and has left the Congress(I) several times in the past because it didn't revere Rajiv Gandhi enough.

And the PMK and the MDMK are great supporters of the Tamil terrorist group, the LTTE, to the extent that the PMK wants a separate pan-Tamil state to be carved out of north and east Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu.

The greatest loser in the sudden marriage of convenience between the BJP and the ADMK, is naturally the Congress. From the days of Indira Gandhi, the Congress(I) used to contest two-thirds of the Lok Sabha seats leaving the rest to a Dravidian ally. In the last election it fought in alliance with the ADMK, the Congress contested 26 seats out of 39.

This time, Jayalalitha offered the Congress two seats, which could be increased to five if Sonia Gandhi were to campaign. Naturally, the alliance never took off the ground.

However, there was another reason for this.

Raring To Go

In Karnataka, the BJP hopes to make an impressive showing in the coming elections

"In Karnataka, we are the front-runners," says Ananth Kumar, BJP MP from the prestigious Bangalore south constituency and general secretary of the party. "This time we are confident of doing better than the other parties, because of S. Bangarappa's ouster from the Congress and Ramakrishna Hegde's ouster from the Janata Dal. Both those parties' votes are going to be divided while our vote base will increase," he says reflecting on the upbeat mood of the BJP in the state.

He adds: "The BJP's target at Bhuwaneswar was 273-plus number of seats. We are planning to contest all the 28 seats in the state and our campaign line of 'able leader, stable government' is sure to set the BJP juggernaut rolling in Karnataka."

B.S. Yediyurappa, president of the state unit of the BJP, says the party is gearing up to contest all the seats but is open for alliances. "The Bangarappa factor is really going to hurt the Congress; and the JD is a divided house."

Ramakrishna Hegde: holds the key to the BJP's electoral fortunes in Karnataka

Though Bangarappa is willing to negotiate with the BJP, the BJP has so far been cool towards him and his newly-floated Karnataka Vikas Party. "Bangarappa has his own vote bank and we thought it will not benefit the BJP much since this vote bank cannot be easily transferred," says Yediyurappa. "Besides, since the BJP had brought out a charge-sheet against Bangarappa's government when he was CM, it is going to be humiliating for us to have an alliance with him."

Part of Yediyurappa's reluctance to join hands with Bangarappa is purely local politics. Both are from Shimoga district and any alliance would see the BJP state president and the Vikas Party president at loggerheads.

The BJP, however, seems keen to have an alliance with Hegde's Lok Shakti as Hegde is keen on the BJP, though formal negotiations are yet to take place. Though Yediyurappa says his party has already given the green signal to its six sitting MPs to start preparing for the elections, the party is willing to negotiate sharing other seats. "If the alliance with Hegde comes through, I am sure of defeating both the Congress and the Janata Dal in the state convincingly."

Yediyurappa's claim is based on the fact that the BJP, which won six seats last year, missed out winning another four through very narrow margins. "In Udipi, Gulabarga, Tumkur and Dharwad south, our margins were less than 15,000," he says. "Besides these four, our upbeat mood and a good alliance will help us win Shimoga and Bijapur."

The BJP has had fluctuating fortunes in Karnataka. In 1984, it polled 4.7 per cent of the votes only to sink further down to 2.6 per cent in the '89 elections. The Rath Yatra frenzy opened the party's account in the Parliament from the state when it polled its highest-ever percentage of votes (28.7) and won four seats. Last year, though it got a lesser percentage of the votes (about 25) it won six seats against Janata Dal's 18 and Congress's four. •

Gauri Lankesh/Bangalore

The Congress chief in the state, K.V. Thankabalu has prided himself on having Jayalalitha's ear. This time, however, former Andhra Pradesh chief minister, Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy was asked to negotiate with Jayalalitha on the Congress's behalf. He brought along with him, former central minister and MP from the Nilgiris, R. Prabhu.

Prabhu and Jayalalitha have had, at best, a rocky relationship. Several industrial units set up by Prabhu were closed down during the Jayalalitha regime As a result when Jayalalitha figured out that Prabhu was on the negotiating team, she set impossible conditions for the Congress.

Meanwhile, when Thankabalu came to know Prabhu was on Reddy's team and not him, he called Kesri and gave him a mouthful. As a result, Kesri divested Reddy of his Tamil Nadu portfolio. No one negotiated with Jayalalitha, who got a very bad feeling about all of this. That is how the Jayalalitha-BJP alliance was forged.

The BJP is the only party which stood by Jayalalitha during her 'dark days'. When the DMK leaders were gunning for her and Sun TV was flashing images of her luxurious wardrobe, her jewellery collection and her footwear, the BJP was the only party which condemned her arrest. The then BJP general secretary, V. Maitreyan issued a statement criticising the arrest of Jayalalitha on corruption charges and even visited her shortly after she was released from prison. While ADMK's new-found ally, the MDMK, at the time demanded confiscation of her property, its then ally, the Congress(I) didn't even issue a statement. The BJP's behaviour was in sharp contrast.

Mani Shankar Aiyar: "Thanks to Mr Sitaram Kesri, the BJP will get at least two seats from Tamil Nadu. Unless we change our leader, the Congress(I) is finished in Tamil Nadu"

Though she heads a Dravidian party, Jayalalitha hasn't tried to hide her pro-Hindu upper-caste bias

Tamil Nadu is the biggest feather in the BJP's cap. They hope that it will have a spillover effect in neighbouring Kerala where the Congress base is strong but the party is badly fragmented. In Kerala, the Hindu Munnani-backed BJP has been increasing its percentage of votes, though not seats.

"Oh Madam, it is roses all the way," exclaimed Ananth Kumar to SUNDAY when he was asked if the alliance with the Ramakrishna Hegde-led Lok Shakti had been clinched. "He (Hegde) is sending us bouquets of roses every morning." So what was keeping the announcement?

"You see, Madam, we don't want love at first sight and divorce at first night," said Ananth Kumar poetically if ungrammatically. "We want to work out a lasting alliance, not one which will crack under pressure."

The BJP is working towards an alliance with Lok Shakti which has been held up because Hegde is asking for too many seats. A possible ally is also S. Bangarappa, but he is making too many demands on the BJP.

Privately BJP leaders say they would prefer not to have anything to do with Bangarappa. "He will split the votes of the Congress. We would prefer four-cornered contests," they told SUNDAY. This stands to reason. If the Congress, the Janata Dal and S. Bangarappa contest against the BJP, in many constituencies this would be to the BJP's advantage, because, the so-called secular ground would be divided four ways.

State Of Unrest

The BJP is a divided house in Madhya Pradesh

It was a well-timed move. On the eve of the meeting of the BJP national executive at Bhubaneswar, half-a-dozen members of the BJP's state executive resigned from their posts. These included former chief minister Kailash Joshi, former state party president Dr Laxminarayan Pandey, former party treasurer Laxminarayan Sharma, bearded MP from Seoni, Prahalad Patel and MLA, Karan Verma.

"This is a revolt against the party leadership and a case of utter indiscipline," said a follower of Sunderlal Patwa, MP from Chhindwara and former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh.

It has been building up for some time. But it was clear that fireworks were in store. The MP from Khajuraho, Uma Bharti, contacted the top leadership of the BJP last month when the issue of deciding a state party president came up for discussion.

Uma Bharti is an ambitious lady and knows the party will do well in the Assembly elections due next year. So she's gearing up to become chief minister

Bharti spoke to Atal Behari Vajpayee, L.K. Advani and told them that Patwa should not get the top post. The story of Patwa's antipathy to a group of BJP leaders from the state goes back to 1995 when Sunder Singh Bhandari was in charge of the state and slogans like 'Bhandari Bhagao, Desh Bachao' were raised at party meetings.

Ironically, Kushabhau Thakre, one of the persons who is alleged to have created a situation leading to the raising of such slogans, replaced Bhandari as the central incharge. Thakre was determined to set things right in Bhopal. On top of his list was the replacement of Laxminarayan Pandey as the state chief. That the state unit didn't like all this tinkering from above was obvious. During organisational elections, bombs were flung in the Bhopal office of the BJP and effigies of Thakre were burnt in different places around the state.

Meanwhile, the state BJP unit president was changed. It was now Nand Kumar Sai, believed to be a crony of the Patwa camp.

As the anti-Patwa group became active in Madhya Pradesh, so did the pro-Patwa group. "Uma Bharti is an ambitious lady and knows the party will do well in the Assembly elections due next year. So she's gearing up to become chief minister."

The anti-Patwa group says this is rubbish and says that if Patwa is given unfettered charge of Madhya Pradesh, the BJP will not fare well in the state. To prove their point, these leaders say the people whom Patwa has coopted on the state working committee are non-entities. "For instance, Dhruv Narayan Singh is the son of former Congress leader Govind Narayan Singh. Ramlal is a BJP worker from Madsaur. Vivek Chejwalkar...who knows these people? No one knows them except Patwa," they say.

Although the Uma Bharti group quit the state working committee, they took great care to prevent people from coming to know of this. However, chief minister Digvijay Singh, to oblige his old friend, got the report published in an evening newspaper, knowing it would be picked up. Sure enough it was, and Kailash Joshi had to sign a denial that he had resigned from the state executive in protest against Patwa, on the Bina railway station as he was on his way to Bhubaneswar.

The BJP has 28 Lok Sabha seats from Madhya Pradesh, with 41.3 per cent votes. It has reached a saturation point. And the way the Uma Bharti-Patwa brawl is hotting up, for the BJP the news from Madhya Pradesh isn't too happy. •

Deshdeep Saxena/Bhopal

Earlier, the Congress(I) was confident that in the Mandya region and in the Mangalore area it would make inroads. Now, with the Bangarappa factor, it is no longer so sure.

The BJP, on the other hand, has reasons for its self-confidence. In the past, when the two Janata Dal/Janata Party titans H.D. Deve Gowda and Ramakrishna Hegde have contested elections unitedly, the Janata Dal has done well. Whenever the two leaders fought with each other, it is the Janata Dal which has been the victim. In 1989, the Janata Dal lost power because Hegde and Deve Gowda parted ways. In 1985, they swept to power because they contested together. The BJP's assessment is that in 1998, once again, the Janata Dal will lose power because there is no scope of a deal between the two leaders. Apart from this, the BJP says they were a close second in six seats during the last general election. In five out of six corporations, the BJP is in opposition because the Congress and the JD got together. This time, that option is not open to them.

L.K. Advani: the BJP's southern campaign will be launched from Quilon, in Kerala, by the party president

L.K. Advani is going to launch the BJP campaign from the south from Quilon in Kerala. This is another symbolic move that the BJP values the south.

About Andhra Pradesh, the only state where the party hasn't been able to make much headway, the BJP is making no predictions. Traditionally, the BJP has been getting two seats from Andhra Pradesh, though in the last general election, one of these, the Old City constituency in Hyderabad went to a faction of the Majlis-e-Ittehadul-Muslimeen (MIM).

There is a historical reason for this. The *shilanyas* and the subsequent Rath Yatra of L.K. Advani was the period when the BJP saw the most dramatic growth of its base. As the Telangana area of Andhra Pradesh also has the largest concentrated Muslim population, the BJP thought that by concentrating on Telangana, it would consolidate the Hindu base and manage to make a dent in the support base of the Congress.

What the party did not reckon with is the massive armed struggle against the domination of the Reddys — and the Congress — in that area by the extremist People's War Group (PWG).

The PWG saw the BJP as a political inconvenience in its war against the landlords, as it indeed was. And unlike the Congress, there were no BJP landlords, only fresh-faced college youths working to make Hindutva more popular among young people and lure them away from the Godless Left extremists.

The PWG launched a merciless attack on the VHP, killing as many as six workers at a time. The BJP could not really establish a hold over Andhra Pradesh. They made another attempt — they tried to raise the cattle slaughter issue, protesting that the Al Kabeer abattoir was slaughtering all the cattle of Andhra Pradesh and that it be shut down.

During the cattle slaughter campaign, the BJP attempted to cash in on a nascent movement that already existed, spearheaded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati, named after the Hindu revivalist leader. The latter-day Swami Dayanand's mission in life is to follow the activities of Al Kabeer from state to state and shut them down wherever he could. Though the BJP got a lot of publicity from the cattle slaughter movement, it couldn't really turn the campaign into votes

It is negotiating with NTR's widow, Lakshmi Parvathi in Andhra Pradesh However, BJP leaders concede that this time, the party is reconciled to giving AP a miss. The Congress(I), however factionalised, is clear that it will not let the BJP increase its base in Andhra.

Is the BJP's optimism about south India well founded? The psychological impact of an alliance with the ADMK is the beginning. But the mood at Bhubaneswar was cautiously optimistic. The rate at which the Congress is splitting, it could try for the Nobel Prize in physics for managing to split an atom But the BJP isn't making a big deal of this. Their fear is that they may have the power but they won't know the language. •

A possible ally for the BJP is S. Bangarappa, but he is making too many demands on the party

Sreedhar Pillai/Madras, Deshdeep Saxena/Bhopal, Gauri Lankesh/Bangalore and G.S. Radhakrishna /Hyderabad

Islamic fundamentalists alter communal equations in Tamil Nadu

With sectarian hardliners gaining ground, Tamil Nadu's reassuring communal harmony may soon become a thing of the past. In December 1992, when the Babri Majid was demolished in Ayodhya and large parts of northern India succumbed to widespread rioting, Tamil Nadu had remained characteristically quiet. But in the five years since then, it's been an entirely different story.

In a state where Muslims have generally kept a low profile, militant fundamentalists have taken over the community's leadership. Muslim militants are suspected to have masterminded the bomb blasts in three trains that left seven dead and at least ten injured last fortnight, creating a sense of uncertainty and fear. "It is tragic that such communal divide should occur in this state, where even during the Dravidian movement, the Muslims have played a notable role, and the intermediate castes, who have shaken free of the thraldom of the Brahmins, have looked upon the Muslims as their own brethren," laments Dalit Ezhimali, general secretary of the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK).

Inside a mosque in Madras: a new ethos in the making

Peace at a discount

Intelligence reports say that bolstered security in Maharashtra following the March 1993 serial bombings in Bombay have forced arms and explosives smugglers to shift operations to the southern coasts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. And, simultaneously, Muslim fundamentalists are said to have stepped up their activities in coastal towns in regions like Tuticorin, Ramanathapuram, Kollam and Kozhikode.

It is well known that drug-trafficking with the help of the LTTE was, and continues to be, the chief means of financing the illegal arms trade. The Havala trade, too, has shifted, to a very great extent, from Bombay to Madras and to other cities of Tamil Nadu. Incidentally, Havala kingpin Amir Bhai, who is wanted by the Indian government, comes from a small village called Keezhakarai in the Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu.

In March this year, the Tamil Nadu police had seized a huge quantity of explosives from a house at Kodungaiyur, a Madras suburb. The then director-general of police, Rajashekharan Nair, had described the haul as "the largest quantity seized from a single place after the recovery from the Dawood Ibrahim gang in Bombay", and felt the motive behind the stockpile was to set off serial blasts in important places.

In the five years since the demolition of the Babri Masjid, Tamil Nadu has suffered several devastating bomb attacks. The first was an unsuccessful attempt on the life of the noted film director, Mani Ratnam, by a Muslim fundamentalist group that was upset with his depiction of Muslims in his film *Bombay*. Then, in July 1995, several parcel bombs went off in different places, killing the wife of a Hindu Munnani (HM) functionary (the HM is a rightwing party of Hindu

RAVI SHANKARAN

Jayalalitha's government was considered to be more pro-Hindu than Kalyan Singh's in UP. The Hindu Munnani saw her as their own representative. And the way Jayalalitha flaunted her faith did much to alienate the Muslims

RAVI SHANKARAN

"We love India as much as any other person"

Al-Umma chief S.A. Basha on the Tamil Nadu riots

S.A. Basha, 48, is the founder-president of Al-Umma, a militant Muslim outfit. He was arrested under TADA but is presently out on bail. Excerpts from SUNDAY's interview with him.

SUNDAY: Is Al-Umma behind the Coimbatore riots and responsible for the bomb blasts in Tamil Nadu?
S A. Basha: We founded Al-Umma in Coimbatore in 1993 to protect ourselves from the thugs of Hindu Munnani. We handed over the culprits who stabbed the traffic constable, which began the riots. The riots were engineered by the communal Coimbatore cops along with supporters of Hindu fronts.

How can you say that?
A: It was a pre-planned attack which targeted only Muslim establishments. The police knew which were Muslim and Hindu shops, as Muslim shops with Hindu names were targeted by the mob.

Q: What about the train blasts?
A: Al-Umma has nothing to do with them. The Kerala police has gone on record saying that some Hindu organisation may have done it and passed the buck on to Muslim organisations.

Q: What are the objectives of Al-Umma?
A: We are not fighting for a separate Muslim state or anything like that. All we want is peace from Hindu communalists and they should not interfere in our Shariat or our customs. We love India as much as any other person.

Q: Why did this communal divide take place in Tamil Nadu?
A: The Sangh Parivar was able to influence Jayalalitha and her police force during her time. This created a lot of heartburn in our community.

Q: What about rumours that you are soft towards the DMK and the Karunanidhi government?
A: Karunanidhi is the best chief minister Tamil Nadu ever had. He understands the problems of the minorities and has gone a long way to help us. However, after the Coimbatore riots, I think he is slightly soft on the Sangh Parivar.

zealots). Again, that very year, the HM head office in Madras was blasted. Earlier, in 1993, the state headquarters of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had been blown up with RDX explosives. And all these attacks were believed to have been carried out by members of Islamic fundamentalist organisations such as Al-Umma, Tamizhaga Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam (TMMK), and the Jehad Committee of Palani Baba.

The rise of Islamic militancy in Tamil Nadu coincided with the growth of Hindu fundamentalism spearheaded by HM and the Sangh Parivar. The Hindu backlash had, in turn, been provoked by a large-scale conversion of Dalits into Muslims in the southern Tamil Nadu districts through the early 1980s. These conversions were believed to have been inspired by liberal offerings of Gulf money and a proselytising Muslim clergy. Hindu diehards, worried by the goings-on, quickly banded together to stem what they imagined was a rising Islamic tide. Since then, Tamil Nadu often experienced an underlying tension, but it's only in the last four years that communal ties have repeatedly snapped with grue-

SCORP NEWS

Muslim militants are suspected to have masterminded the bomb blasts in three trains that left seven dead and at least ten injured last fortnight, creating a sense of uncertainty and fear

some outcome.

When Jayalalitha came to power, her government was considered to be more pro-Hindu than Kalyan Singh's in Uttar Pradesh. The HM saw her as their own representative. And the way Jayalalitha flaunted her faith did much to alienate the Muslims.

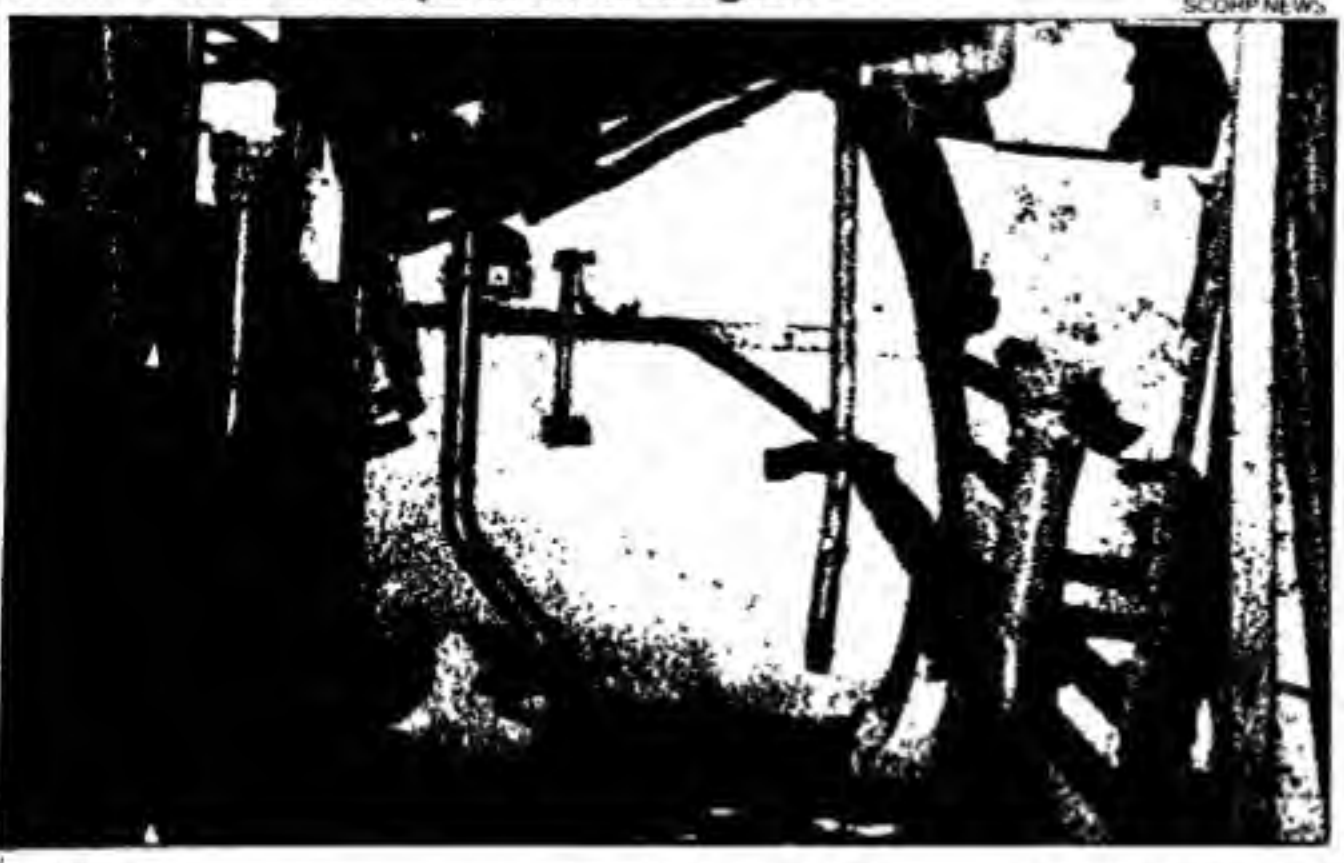
And in the growing communal hiatus, neighbouring Kerala also played a role in propping Muslim militancy in Tamil Nadu. It has sent waves of Muslim activists from Malappuram — a Muslim-majority district in Kerala. But when the RSS retaliated, Madhani, a Muslim leader, lost his leg. This made him quit the militant fringe and opt for mainstream Muslim politics. He floated a new party called the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), leaving behind a large body of Muslim youths, indoctrinated in his fundamentalist rhetorics.

According to Tamil Nadu police intelligence, many of these activists later migrated to Coimbatore and set up shop around Kotamedu, the city's Muslim ghetto. The police also claim that some of them had received training in the use of explosives from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence and were ready to work for Muslim fundamentalist organisations in Tamil Nadu.

Kerala's director-general of police C A. Chaly says there is enough evidence to suggest a nexus between Muslim fundamentalist groups in Tamil Nadu's Coimbatore and their counterparts in Kerala's Malappuram. Last April, the Kerala police had dug up 97 pipe-bombs — an improvised device in which explosives are packed into metal pipes — from the bank of the Kadalundi river in Malappuram district. In connection with the haul, the police arrested one Imam Ali — believed to be a member of the Al-Umma — from Ponnani in Malappuram. Similar bombs had been used in attacks in Tamil Nadu.

A bombed-out train compartment: clear signals

SCORP NEWS



The fundamentalist groups are determined to preserve the sanctity of their faith and practices, and have struck viciously against any violation of the Islamic social code by Muslims. On 30 June, they targeted a seedy Muslim-owned hotel in Madras, called Light of Asia, for serving liquor. Likewise, Hotel Imperial and Hotel Lucky — also in Madras and owned by Muslims — were bombed for staging cabarets and discos.

A few years back, similar incidents had been reported from Malappuram in Kerala where wine shops and cinema halls had been torched. The fundamentalists had warned that they would target Muslim establishments "that were indulging in activities contrary to Islamic laws"

Meanwhile, Hindu organisations are holding the DMK responsible for the rise in Muslim militancy. "Constant attacks on Hinduism, its scriptures and Gods by the ruling DMK and its pronounced pro-Muslim stance give a fillip to the growth of Muslim organisations in the state," claims a Hindu activist.

Tamil Nadu today is a vicious breeding ground of the communal virus hitherto unknown here. Decades of sectarian harmony that had been ensured by Muslim leaders such as Qaid-e-Millath and Mohammad Ismail now appear to have come to an end with younger and less educated leaders setting a different agenda for the community. And if the drift is allowed to continue — and that looks quite a possibility with the new electoral alliance — the communal chasm may become too wide to bridge. •

Sreedhar Pillai/Madras

RAJIV SHUKLA

Sleeping it off

Sitaram Kesri ignores wake-up calls and misses the bus everywhere

Why has the Congress high command lost the political game in Tamil Nadu? Could it be blamed on the party' slackness and indifferent attitude?

For the last two months, a number of Congress leaders from the state, including former MP Mani Shankar Aiyar and Rangarajan Kumaramangalam, had been asking the leadership to initiate a dialogue with Jayalalitha. But the AICC top brass did not pay any heed.

In fact, a month back, Aiyar had even written to Congress president Sitaram Kesri, urging him not to seek the help of TNCC president K.V. Thangabalu for negotiations with the AIADMK. He had advised that Kesri should either meet Jayalalitha personally or send a senior AICC functionary such as Madhavrao Scindia for talks with Jayalalitha.

Aiyar had also suggested that Thangabalu should be replaced with K. Ramamurthy. He argued that Jayalalitha would be more keen to talk to Ramamurthy than Thangabalu, a person she does not like. Kumaramangalam, too, had requested the leadership to get into the act as he had secret information of the BJP's parleys with Jayalalitha.

The reason why Kesri chose not to act was that Thangabalu and Congress Working Committee (CWC) member Vijaybhaskar Reddy had both kept him in the dark about the possibilities of a BJP-AIADMK alliance. None of them seemed to know anything about the BJP's negotiations with Jayalalitha. Reddy had, in fact, told Kesri not to worry about Tamil Nadu.

Reddy did meet Jayalalitha, but only last fortnight. He discussed the alliance on the lines of Rajiv Gandhi in which only 10 seats out of 39 had been given to the AIADMK. Jayalalitha countered by saying the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC) had walked away with a major chunk of Congress votes and, as such, the Congress couldn't be given the lion's share.

Jayalalitha was also upset with the Congress for two other reasons. First, the party had offered her left in the lurch during last year and a half when the DMK government in Tamil Nadu and TMC leaders at the Centre allegedly harassed her. Instead of standing by her, poll partners, the Congress supported the United Front government in Delhi in which the DMK and the TMC were the constituents. Secondly, she did not like the way Congress leaders hobnobbed with TMC leaders. She specially resented Kesri's proximity to TMC chief G.K. Moopanar.

In fact, Kesri was uncertain till the eleventh on whether to go with the AIADMK or the TMC. It was only when Moopanar and Chidambaram announced their decision to contest along with the DMK that the Congress initiated poll talks with Jayalalitha. Interestingly, Vijaybhaskar Reddy, who was entrusted with the job, is a dissident who does not want Kesri to continue as Congress president. So, the possibility of Reddy sabotaging Kesri's game plan

A number of Congress leaders from Tamil Nadu like former MP (clockwise from top left) Mani Shankar Aiyar and Rangarajan Kumaramangalam had been asking Sitaram Kesri to initiate a dialogue with Jayalalitha. But the AICC top brass did not pay any heed

cannot be ruled out.

The Congress high command committed the same mistake in Mamata Banerjee's case also. It banked entirely on the version of Pranab Mukherjee and Somen Mitra. It was left to V. George, private secretary Sonia Gandhi, to bring all sides to the negotiating table. But, again, the effort came too late in the day.

In Karnataka, too, the party bosses bungled in talking to Ramakrishna Hegde. Meanwhile, Hegde has had feelers from the BJP. And it is only now that Kesri has woken up from his slumber and is directly talking to Hegde. •

Why me?

The quarrel in the Election Commission is sorted out. But G.V.G. Krishnamurthy is asking himself why it started at all

It has happened several times. Gali Venkata Gopala Krishnamurthy is in the middle of answering a question on how the Election Commission proposes to tackle this or that problem. Suddenly TV cameras record an elbow connecting with his ribs. Then abruptly, chief election commissioner M.S. Gill tells the press conference firmly that Krishnamurthy has nothing more to say. In a flurry of thank yous the conference is adjourned. Krishnamurthy repairs to his room at Nirvachan Sadan presumably to fume in silence, while Gill proceeds to hand out sound bites.

When Krishnamurthy's friends asked him why he was putting up with all this, he waved the whole thing away. He'd been appointed to the Election Commission to hold free and fair elections. He was going to do his job, no matter what.

However, a few weeks ago, things went beyond control and Krishnamurthy felt he couldn't take it any more.

For the last several months, the Election Commission has been holding press conferences and telling reporters of the dire consequences that would befall the Congress and other political parties if they did not hold organisational elections. Thanks to the Seshan effect and the teeth given to the EC, political parties realised that this was no empty threat and somehow managed to conduct elections in time.

But not all of them. The commission's records showed that the Shiv Sena had not conducted organisational elections, and therefore, risked derecognition.

After the general elections were declared and the EC had announced that only those parties which have completed organisational elections would be allowed to contest the elections, politicians began taking sly digs at Krishnamurthy. Sharad Yadav asked if the EC had managed to make the Shiv Sena, in his view a fascist organisation, hold elections. The Janata Dal wanted to know why the EC was adopting double standard.

Krishnamurthy told everyone that the Election Commission had taken a unanimous decision to make the Shiv Sena hold organisational elections. But he couldn't say whether the party was going to obey the EC, because the Sena had written to the EC that regular elections were not mandated by its constitution.

He began to sense that the EC could attract the charge of favouring the Shiv Sena. Finally, when the taunts became pointed, he called a press conference and said he'd written to the Shiv Sena to find out why it hadn't held elections.

Krishnamurthy thought he was only repeating a unanimous decision of the Election Commission. He was therefore appalled to find his statement being questioned by Gill, at that time in Bhopal. Not only did Gill seek a 'code of conduct' for the Election Commission, but also said he was 'surprised' to read Krishnamurthy's statement.

Politicians and reporters got the impression that if Krishnamurthy had written to the Shiv Sena quietly, Gill might not have minded so much. But because he'd announced in public that the EC was not going to let the Sena off, Krishnamurthy had apparently transgressed and poached upon a function that was the CEC's.

Krishnamurthy is a short-tempered and abrasive workaholic. He has no other interests, is emotional and volatile. But he has a keen understanding of constitutional law

Angered at this unwarranted pulling of rank, Krishnamurthy went on leave and called the Prime Minister and the President, informing them that he was going to quit. His letter of resignation was typed.

It took the combined persuasion of I.K. Gujral and K.R. Narayanan to make him change his mind. Meanwhile, the Shiv Sena did hold elections, making Bal Thackeray party chief for life.

Then the Shiv Sena announced that it would not attend a single meeting of the Election Commission if Krishnamurthy was present. Gill should have retorted that the Election Commission would not hold a single meeting with the Shiv Sena if Krishnamurthy was *not* present. But he did nothing of the kind.

Krishnamurthy, who is a short-tempered and abrasive workaholic, has many faults. He is intense about his work, has no other interests, is emotional and volatile.

But he has a keen understanding of constitutional law, and was appointed to the Election Commission because his presence would have obviated the need to send every legal decision to be vetted by the law ministry.

After R. Peri Sastry, the government felt that the EC badly needed a legal brain on it, someone who could draw up ordinances and legislations quickly and decisively — something that the law ministry would agonise over and then come up with conflicting opinions.

Take the issue of raising the ceiling on election expenditure by candidates. The Prime Minister called for a draft of the ordinance, because Parliament had already been dissolved. Krishnamurthy sat up all night and drafted the ordinance. It was sent to the PMO and will probably be adopted by the government in the next few weeks.

The President and the PM believe that the Election Commission can use GVG's services. The question is: does the Election Commission think so? •

EASY, MR BHATT

Resignations usually are high drama and seldom sober. You either come out smiling, unscathed apparently but bloodied inside, or whimpering,self-pride in tatters. This one was different. Because Mahesh Bhatt, who was quitting as FTII president, chose to be philosophical.

In a nutshell, it all boiled down to a conflict of ideologies. Bhatt said he didn't believe in organised education. "Institutions polish pebbles, but no institution," he said "has produced Dilip Kumars or R.D. Mathurs." Fine, argued institute students, but with such 'dichotomy

Bhatt: no dichotomy!

in life', he had no business continuing as institute president. So as a mark of protest, they wore black badges and forced Bhatt to quit after reminding him that once he had even said that had he been Prime Minister of India he would have shut FTII down.

Now that was bad script, Mr Bhatt. You may not believe in film education but there may be others who do.

HURT LYRIC

A snub for a snub. Two years back, claims lyricist Majrooh Sultanpuri, Manohar Joshi had deliberately slighted him at an awards function for being a Muslim. Now, it was *his* turn. So when the same government wanted to offer him an award, the hurt lyricist refused to accept it from the chief minister. "I prefer to take it from a peon instead," he told Joshi's emissary, culture minister Pramod Navalkar.

Coming back to the original 'sin', Joshi had apparently refused to speak to Sultanpuri at an Asha Bhonsle function. "For the first four or five awardees, he personally

SANTOSH GHOSH

Goenka: Net profit?

WEBSITE TUNES

Time brings about its own changes. You don't anymore talk of businessmen being insensitive money-machines with no aesthetics. Remember Ebenezer Scrooge? The "grasping old sinner" as hard as flint. That's a Dickensian prototype and no longer valid. Think of this: a year from now you type in http://www.saregama.co-m on your computer keyboard and, hey presto! there's music on the web. Not just the trendy, snazzy sort but real classical stuff. Like Kishori Amonkar's Jaunpuri, Shobha Gurtu's *thumris* or Amjad Ali Khan's Pilu. Possibly even rarer ones like Bade Ghulam Ali Khan's Sohoni and Kesarbai Kerkar's Basant Bahar. And the man who is bringing you the music is R.P. Goenka.

Of course, it isn't just aesthetics. Old man Goenka is planning to make RPG Music International the world's most profitable music company. No reason why he can't.

ROOTS?

A verbal spat to begin with. That was with writer John LeCarre, and never mind the reasons...it's gory anyway. Then behaving like a land-hungry preying mantis. What's wrong with Salman Rushdie?

Nothing apparently, if you see his new acquisitional streak as a search for another hide-out. Rushdie has been angling for a disputed bungalow on Delhi's Flag Staff Road which he claims to be

Sultanpuri and Joshi: culture barriers

got up and shook hands," he said. "But when it came to me, he refused to get up, let alone speak." So why did you keep mum, Mr Sultanpuri? Quick comes the retort: "Who'd stoop so low?"

That's a rare cultured response. Hopefully Joshi learns that it doesn't pay to be rude. You only end up exposing yourself.

RAJIB BASU

Rushdie: in search of a haven

ancestral property. But there's a catch. The house in question, is currently occupied by the son of former Congress MP B.C. Jain. And going by recent Congress capers — that is hang on at any rate — he isn't likely to vacate in a hurry. Now, how Rushdie gets around this little snag will be worth watching.

CLOTHES-SPEAK

[redacted] If there's anything called psychedelic poetry, it's in couture kingdom. How else, unless the 'kick' factor is very high, do you dream up labels like 'Blue Grass and Purple Rain', 'When the Doves Cry', or 'Cannabis Indica'?

Easy, if you are Gitanjali Kashyap making a comeback of sorts with her Winter collection '97. Simpler still is the rationale: you have to play on the customers' unconscious. It's the slant that varies. Kashyap's is decidedly eastern: crepes, velvets, silks and satins. One of her designs was even named 'Clothes for the new Gopis'.

A passing thought: we know that clothes have their own language. But, exactly how much is the allure of those wild, wild names?

Kashyap and her designs: touch of the Orient

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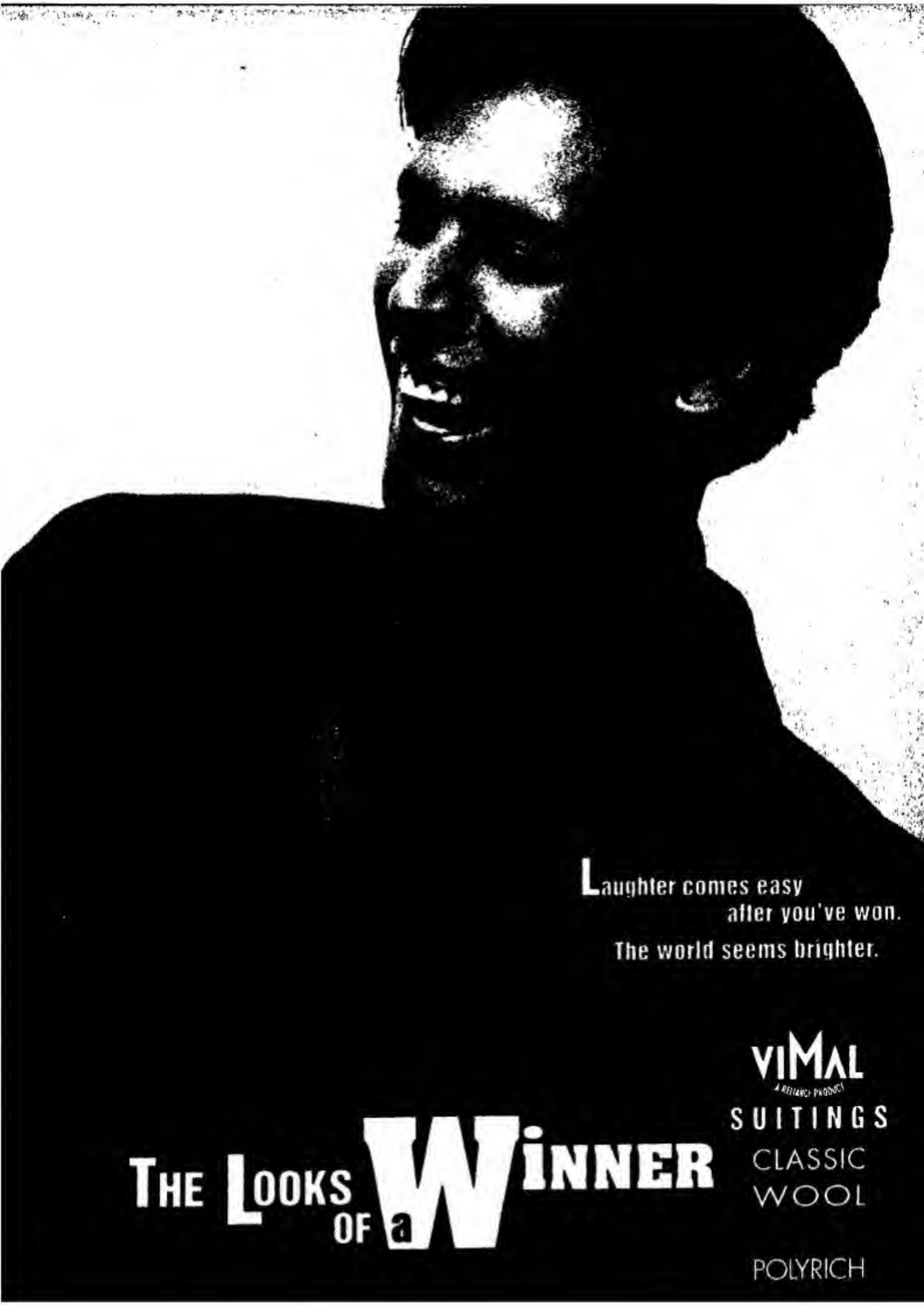
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THE LOOKS OF a WINNER

HOME away from HOME

The demand for creches is steadily rising. Are they up to it?

RAJWINDER SHARMA

When Louise Woodward, the British nanny charged with murdering baby Matthew Eappen (her charge during her stay in the US), was acquitted on grounds of involuntary manslaughter, mothers of young children who followed the trial on satellite channels could feel the chill going down their spines.

"I relived the trauma of those years," says 28-year-old Kalpana Basu who had to leave her less-than-a-year-old son in the care of a maid for the better part of the day until recently. "She [the maid] handled him so carelessly even while I was around. I don't want to think about what could have happened in my absence." Kalpana thinks Louise is guilty of causing death by negligence and fully empathises with the Eappens.

Nannies who would look after the child's health and contribute to its upbringing are hard to come by in India. So the next best option for working parents living in nuclear families is to send the child to a day care centre. We have quite a few of these in the country's metros. But are they up to it?

"We were searching desperately for a good creche for our eight-month-old son," reminisces Ratna Ghatak. "We must have looked at at least a dozen creches in Delhi. Most of them were not ready to take in such a small child." Finally, in desperation, the couple settled for a dingy neighbourhood creche. "I would come back in the evening and inevitably find him wet and crying. Soiled clothes were hardly ever changed," she recalls.

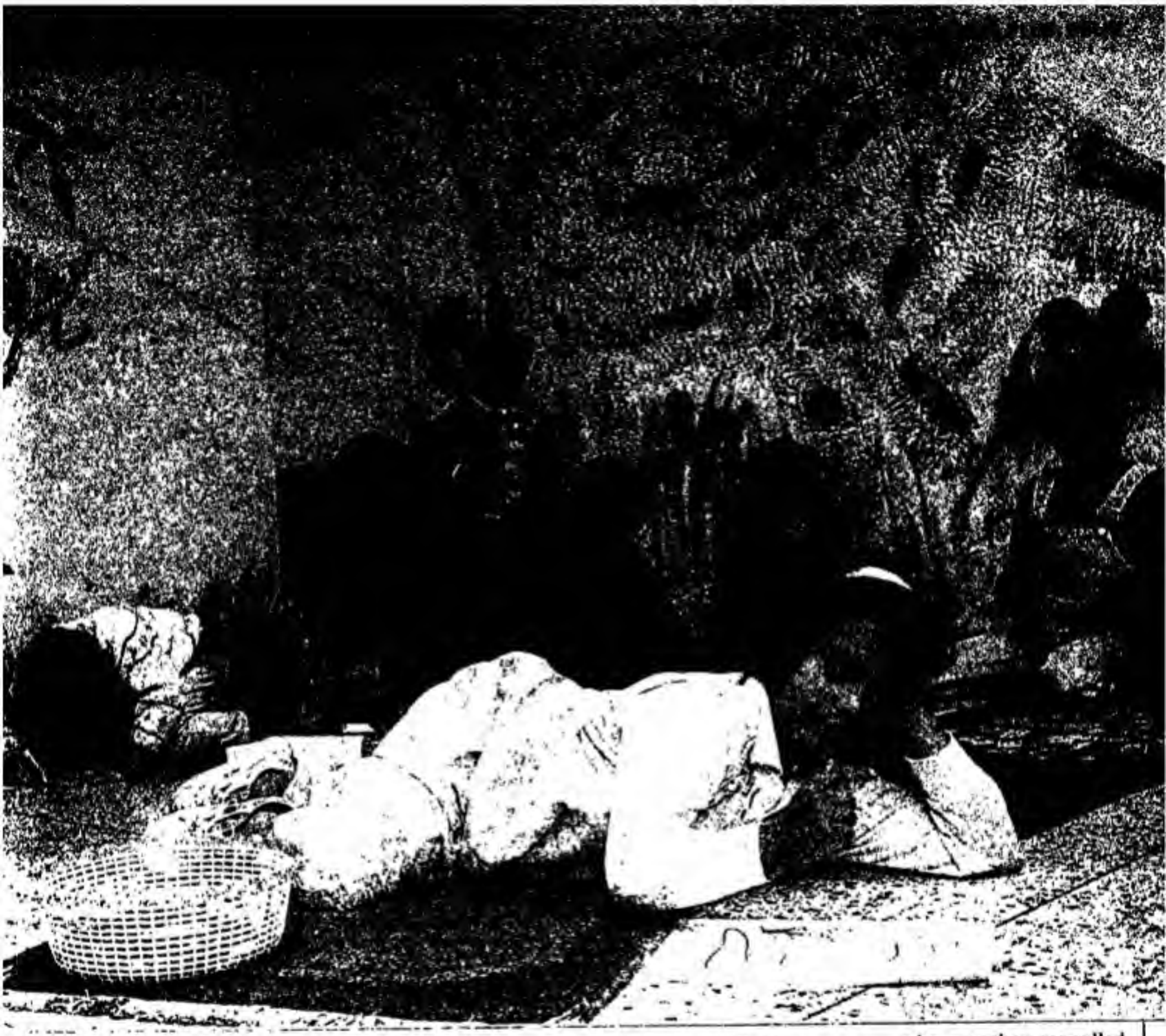
Some months later, when the child was a little older, Ratna discovered St Thomas creche (attached to St Thomas School, Pusa Road). "Mrs Michael, who ran the creche had been abroad for a long time and had come back with notions of what an ideal creche should be. She tried to duplicate here all that she had seen abroad." Ratna recalls her first impressions of a huge, fully-carpeted room — small chairs and tables neatly arranged. A few efficient ayahs were working under the constant supervision of the motherly Mrs Michael. "She insisted that the child should bring only an extra change of clothes with him." Food and milk were provided by the creche. Adds Ratna, "There was something so reassuring about Mrs Michael. She inspired confidence. I was sure that my baby was in able hands."

"I guess, I got lucky," she says wryly.

Indeed, professionally-run creches are hard to find. The majority of creches, whether in metros or in the smaller cities, are privately run by

Dolna is possibly one place, where love and care apart, health and hygiene are given top priority

MANJUSHREE DASGUPTA



housewives or aged ladies at their residence as a source of additional income. Take Malti Kulkarni, a housewife who runs a creche at her flat in a middle-class suburban locality of Malad in Bombay, "to constructively utilise time while the husband is at work and the children are at school". She candidly admits that running a creche is lucrative business with hardly any investment.

Mrs Gupta, who opened a make-shift creche in Delhi a couple of months back, is confident of managing the 'business' of which she has had little prior experience. "It's not about professional training, it's about commitment," she says. "I understand children and I know I can manage them." But she only admits children above three years of age. "For smaller children, I would have to employ an ayah ... there are too many hassles."

Unfortunately, the ideal day care centre is, more often than not, completely out of bounds for the average middle-class working couple

The housewife-run-creche business is not restricted to metros alone. In some localities of Bhopal, for instance, it is almost as easy to find a creche as a grocer's shop. The number of privately-run creches are mostly in the posh areas of the city. Most of these *jhula ghars*, as they are called, keep ten to 12 children aged between two months and five years. A Maharashtrian housewife who recently got her small LIG house a marble flooring to attract more customers, says, "My purpose is to give these children the real Indian *sanskar* (culture)."

Day care facilities in Bhopal come cheaper than that in the metros. It is something between a basic fee of Rs 200 to 400, as compared to the amount charged by those in Bombay and Delhi (between Rs 500 and Rs 1500 exclusive of facilities like food, homework assistance, pick up from bus stop etc.).

While creches seem to be mushrooming all over the metros and even showing up in small towns, the quality often

THEY CARE

Corporate groups are offering creche facility for employees' children

INDIAN AIRLINES: The company has set up a creche in Vasant Vihar, Delhi where most of the staffers reside.

MARUTI UDYOG: The creche is located far away from the polluted industrial environment. The services of the company medical officer comes free of charge. Says a senior human resources officer: "We have tried to include all possible facilities for the children of our female employees. We are giving milk and food, completely free of cost."

GLAXO: The group has an in-house creche for its women employees where the children are looked after by qualified nurses.

NIIT: There is a company-sponsored quality creche close to the office. NIIT encourages working more out of home — turning the home into a virtual workplace. Therefore, it has introduced the "little NIITian care leave" which allows a parent (either mother or father) to take leave upto six months or half-day leave for a year, besides the three months' maternity leave given to the mother.

VIKAS KHOT

leaves much to be desired. Recently, the owner of a child care centre in Bandra, Bombay allegedly locked up the children in a room for several hours. A few years ago, a creche in Mira Road, Bombay was forcibly shut down after it came to light that the children were sexually abused by the son of the creche owner. "There is an urgent need for some sort of minimum standards and safety regulations to be made mandatory when one opens a creche," says Mohini Prakash, executive director, Mobile Creches. "Formalising something may be at the cost of the personal touch but it is likely to lift the general quality of foster care facilities."

In the few professionally-run day care centres, the demand is, understandably, a lot more than they can cope with. Like it is with the department of child development, Lady Irvin College, University of Delhi. The facilities include an infant care centre (for six month to three-year olds), a day care centre (for children between three and five years) — available only for children enrolled in the institution's play centre or nursery school. There is also an after-school care centre (for five-to-12-year olds) which offers care, recreational and creative learning facilities for children from other schools from 12.30 to 5.30 pm. Besides, the centre also runs an integrated pre-school-cum-day-care programme for children with congenital or acquired disabilities.

"We do not operate on profit considerations," states supervisor Indu Kaura. "We are not interested in numbers. The child's needs are of prime importance here."

Dolna in Calcutta is the most sought-after creche in the city. It has room for everyone. It's a place where three-month-old babies sleep contentedly as 16-year-olds play a round of carom. The older children go to a day school affiliated to the ICSE board. They can stay on in the creche till evening when their parents come back from work.

"Dolna is possibly one place, where love and care apart, health and hygiene are given top priority," says founder owner Manjushree Dasgupta. The institution even draws out diet charts for the parents to follow. "And yes, I am very strict about adhering to it," says Dasgupta. "As I am about things like cleanliness, discipline, eating habits etc."

Unfortunately, the ideal day care centre is, more often than not, completely out of bounds for the average middle-class working couple. After School Plus or Kids Club in Delhi's Vasant Kunj is one place where children frolic around for hours, oblivious of time or the amount of cash that their parents have to shell out. The day care centre has two committed coordinators-cum-caretakers-cum-instructors — Molly and Leena, both in their early twenties. Molly has experience of teaching in a play school in Muscat, whereas Leena is an MBA and an artist. Ayahs are around but only to assist. All meals are cooked in an in-house kitchen under strictly supervised and hygienic conditions.

"Yes, we are steeply priced," agrees Pratibha Malhotra, owner of After School Plus. "But parents send their kids to us all the way from remote areas of the city simply because they trust us. And, it's a good feeling when the kids actually say that they don't want to go home."

But even a home away from home isn't quite the real thing. "I don't like it when my mother comes late," says five-year-old Sonal plaintively. And Angad, who has to wait a little longer than the other kids for his mother to pick him up, begins to show signs of anxiety after the rest of the kids are gone.

But four-year-old Disha is an excep-

The housewife-run-creche business is not res
of Bhopal it is almost as easy to find a creche

tion. Her parents, who work in different advertising agencies, almost invariably return late from work. Disha prefers to travel all the way from school to the creche and then back home (that's 30 km) everyday. "We have on occasion told her to go straight home from school and sleep, but she insists on being taken there," says Shivaji Bhattacharya, her father.

But isn't Disha losing out on parental care and attention because of their demanding careers?

"She has, in the last four and a half years, known a certain way of life. We have great fun together on weekends and holidays," says Shivaji. "Besides, a dual income also means much more expensive care ... we have the capacity to afford it."

But Saakshi, a Delhi-based journalist

INDU KAURA

"We [Lady Irvin Day Care] do not operate on profit considerations. The child's needs are of prime importance"

who has a one-year-old daughter, does suffer from the odd prick of conscience at times. "Though, I am lucky to have fairly flexible timings, I still often feel torn in two," she says "I would be ridden with a terrible guilt complex if I were getting home late everyday."

Though childcare has been on the official agenda of industrial corporate bodies for more than 50 years, very little has actually been done to help the working woman balance the needs of her child with those of work. The Factories Act, 1948 made it compulsory for all industrial units having more than 30 women workers on their payroll to provide creches for the children of these women. Till date, very few tea gardens, jute mills or coal mines can boast of anything close to a creche.

Again, Section II, Rule 6 of the Maternities Benefit Act, 1961, allows two nursing breaks of 15 minutes duration each in the course of the mother's working day. If the creche is not attached to the workplace, she can take anything between five and 15 minutes time to travel to and fro. This Act assumes that the mother has access to a creche or some other facility near enough for her to avail of the nursing breaks.

"The statutory part of it is all fine," says Sunesha Ahuja, programme director of Mobile Creche . "[But] what of implementation?"

While some of the large corporate houses are making an effort towards that direction (*see box*), many more women working in industries (especially in the unorganised sector) are not even aware of these acts. But they too have children who grow up and quickly learn to look after themselves. Just ensuring that these children have access to decent creches run by well-meaning people could make a world of difference to them. •

CHECKLIST

A parents' manual

- Try to ensure that the creche follows specific instructions from you about feeding your child. It's best if you give it to them in writing
- Try sending pre-bottled or packaged feeds (especially for infants). Chances of infection are higher in a creche formula given to many children together
- Be wary if your child seems abonormally drowsy. Or if the caretaker tells you he sleeps very well when you know he doesn't do so at home. Your child may be sleeping 'peacefully' because of a sedative, or even *apheem* (opium)
- See if you can find a creche that keeps your child engaged in interesting, creative pursuits, rather than sending him to a 'home away from home'
- Do not panic if the child gets too attached to the caretaker, or doesn't want to return home. This won't normally result in a loss of bonding with the child as that is established within the first few months after delivery.
- Ask your child about what happened to him during the day. Probe small details.
- Ensure that the time you spend with your child, however little, is remembered by him or her as the most precious part of the day. Ultimately, it is quality time that matters

MOBILE CRECHE, DELHI

tricted to metros alone. In some localities as a grocer's shop

Chitralekha Dhamija/New Delhi, Deshdeep Saxena/Bhopal, Sushmita Bose/Calcutta and Kajal Walia/Bombay

THE OUTSIDER

After nearly four months of drama and suspense, Mamata Banerjee finally severs ties with the Congress

Mamata Banerjee has been finally expelled from the Congress by the All India Congress Committee (AICC). On 22 December, Calcuttans were stunned when news broke that the firebrand MP from the south Calcutta parliamentary constituency in the recently dissolved Lok Sabha had severed ties with the party she had served for 27 years. She was now going to contest the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls with the symbol of her new political platform, the Trinamool Congress Committee.

"It is I who quit and they (AICC) reacted by expelling me," said Mamata. "And, who cares? This is not the real Congress. And Congress under Kesri I can never accept."

Strong rhetoric, but characteristic of Mamata

It was on Sunday, 21 December, that the drama began taking shape. Sometime late in the evening, word reached Banerjee that Congress president Sitaram Kesri had said in Hyderabad that "she was going to look after only the campaigning part of the elections in the state and will have nothing to do with selection of candidates". For Banerjee, this was a bad shock. It was in open contravention of the compromise formula that was reached in the capital a few days back.

In the first fortnight of December, both West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee (WBPCC) chief Somen Mitra and Mamata Banerjee had camped in New Delhi. While Banerjee had gone to seek election symbols for her party, Mitra and her supporters lobbied to prevent the high command from succumbing to her pressure tactics.

Finally, things could only be settled following Sonia Gandhi's intervention. Sonia, apparently, had conveyed to Kesri that Banerjee should be prevented from quitting the Congress and therefore a compromise had to be reached. The pressure from 10, Janpath compelled Kesri to yield. And a truce was struck.

Accordingly, Banerjee was made the chairperson of the [illegible]desh Electioneering Committee and given the onus of chalking out a poll strategy, and campaign for the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections. And more significantly, she was also given the right to nominate 50 per cent candidates for the state's 42 parliamentary seats. This was bad news for Somen Mitra and his mentor Pranab Mukherjee, both of whom wanted Banerjee isolated.

After her return to Calcutta, Banerjee waited for a formal intimation of her new appointment. But nothing came. All the while, she was aware that 25 December was the deadline for registering her political outfit. After that, she would have no options but to remain in the party.

Mamata's relationship with the AICC had begun to sour ever since Sitaram Kesri became Congress president. Kesri's open support to Mitra and other PCC leaders peeved her. It was somewhat humiliating that despite being the main mobiliser of Congress workers in West Bengal, the AICC had always bypassed her when it came to important assignments. "I have done the Indira Congress and Rajiv Congress. How can you expect me to follow a leader who has no mass base? And whose presence at the top is a threat to the Congress' 'existence?'" argued Banerjee. "What's more, he was supporting all those who shared a cosy relationship with the ruling Left Front. I couldn't take this for long."

Indeed, in August 1997, Mamata had dared the AICC to expel her and floated the Trinamool Congress Committee —

a political platform to fight the Left and other like-minded forces in the state. Banerjee even went further: she held a rebel rally in Calcutta at the time when the AICC session was on in the city, much to the high command's chagrin.

But, according to PCC leaders, what sealed her fate was her alleged 'softening' towards the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Her decision to launch a 'Save Bengal Front' and welcome forces opposed to the Left Front ruffled PCC feathers. She further antagonised Congress leaders when she declared that the "BJP is not untouchable". This was a deliberate, open challenge to the high command, said Pradip Bhattacharya, MP and PCC general secretary.

Apparently, the AICC had asked Banerjee to retract her statement (about the BJP) and apologise to Kesri for abusing him. But Mamata stuck to her guns. And the end was inevitable. "She dug her own grave," said Somen Mitra. "How can you keep a person who is opposed to the Congress ideology? She was openly hobnobbing with the BJP and upset the Congress' Muslim vote-bank in West Bengal. She had to mend herself. But she decided to part ways."

All too simplistic. Banerjee supporters, predictably, don't buy this. "She has become a victim of Pranab Mukherjee's machinations," said Gautam Basu, Trinamool Congress Steering Committee member. "Mukherjee has paid his debt to the CPI(M) for giving him a Rajya Sabha seat by ensuring her exit."

Mamata is more explicit. "Kesri and his advisers have been baying for my blood. They have disregarded Sonia Gandhi and were only waiting for a pretext to remove me," she said.

But whatever the reasons for the split, Banerjee's expulsion will have far-reaching effects. For one, ever since her comment that the BJP was not an 'untouchable', the saffron brigade has been biding its time and sending feelers to her. BJP leader Murli Manohar Joshi, who was in Calcutta recently, went to the extent of saying that the BJP was not averse to any alliance with her. "We have appreciated her statement. She has shown great determination. And we are also willing join a front that is against the ruling Left Front in West Bengal," said Joshi.

"The recent development is very important. We know there is a BJP wave in the state, and that she is also a very popular leader. Nothing could be politically more positive before an election," said BJP MP Vishnukant Shastri.

It is the BJP that is going to benefit the most. So far, politics in the state was polarised between the Congress and the Left. The BJP virtually had no presence. So, for quite sometime now, it was looking for a potential ally to consolidate its position. And Banerjee's 'Save Bengal Front' has given it that opportunity.

"We are happy that she has broken all her ties with the Congress. Now that she is no longer in the Congress, we have no problems if she approaches us or we approach her for a political alliance. The situation is ripe for an understanding and a front that will fight the Congress and the Left in the state," said Muzzaffar Khan, BJP state vice-president.

But Congress leaders in the state are not really bothered. They believe that Mamata's BJP connection is going to deprive her of all Muslim votes and that without the Congress, she is a nobody. "She has completely miscalculated her step, squandering her advantage. She shouldn't forget that the Congress workers are committed voters. They don't vote for individuals but for the hand symbol," said Somen Mitra.

The Left, meanwhile, is closely watching the developments. Glad that the Congress in the state had split, they are also apprehensive of the possible mileage that the BJP can gain out of the situation. "We are not bothered about the split. But yes, we are concerned that the BJP might use the situation to their advantage. And this has to be prevented. Because, it is not the Trinamool or the Congress that is dangerous, it is the BJP," said Sailen Dasgupta, the Left Front chairman.

But younger Marxist leaders like CPI(M) central committee members Anil Biswas and Biman Bose were not really perturbed. "We are a united party and we will get votes on the basis of our work. We have committed voters who support our ideology and it has got nothing to do with what Banerjee does," said Biswas. As for Bose, he feels that Mamata stands to gain nothing. "My political experience says that without the Congress, she is going to be wiped out."

The Left's optimism notwithstanding, whether the lakhs who cheered and supported Mamata all these days will stick with her is a million-dollar question. •

Arindam Sarkar/Calcutta

Sonia, apparently, had conveyed to Kesri (centre) that Banerjee should be prevented from quitting the Congress and therefore a compromise with Somen Mitra (right) had to be reached. The pressure from 10, Janpath compelled Kesri to yield. And a truce was struck

Desperately seeking alliances

Will the Secular Front give Laloo Yadav the clout he needs?

Laloo Prasad Yadav is peeved, angry and insecure. He is peeved that after having played kingmaker in 1996 and installed Deve Gowda as Prime Minister, he was kicked out of his own party. Angry because he has had to spend a humiliating 134 days in judicial custody on corruption charges. Insecure that he might be close to losing his prestige, public standing and status as 'Laloo Bhagwan', as he is known in parts of Bihar.

And his desperate attempt to form a Secular Front is being seen as a lonely man's efforts to throw a party that will boost his morale. Because claims that it will boost his party's *electoral* performance in the coming polls are at best of dubious authenticity

But people close to Laloo say he is not really looking for electoral gains from his alliances. Elections to the Bihar Assembly are not due till the turn of the century and he has time to recoup any ground that he might have lost because of the fodder scam. "That," said one Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader from Bihar, "is not the point." According to him, "Having been thrown out of the United Front, Laloo first wants another 'Front' of his own. And unless he forms some kind of alliance with a national party, he will be relegated to the status of just another regional satrap. Laloo just cannot swallow that."

At the moment, it is uncertain what form, if any, the Secular Front will take. Though Sitaram Kesri, Kanshi Ram, Ajit Singh and Chandra Shekhar have agreed in principle to the alliance, no one is going overboard with enthusiasm. The BSP is divided in two over the issue. The party has no presence in Bihar and the way Kanshi Ram sees it, the BSP can only stand to gain with the Laloo connection. Mayawati however sees the Laloo-Congress alliance as a threat to the BSP in Uttar Pradesh and prefers to stay clear of them altogether.

Ajit Singh and Chandra Shekhar have been more firm in their commitment but they are unlikely to contribute very much, either in terms of seats or morale. The tie-up with the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha could get Laloo some important

Laloo fears that unless he forms some kind of alliance with national parties, he will be relegated to the status of just another regional satrap

gains in south Bihar.

The issue is a little more complicated, however, with the Congress. For years, Laloo has held long tirades against the party. He has accused successive Congress governments at the Centre of deliberately impeding Bihar's growth and the Congress leadership of being in cahoots with the BJP over the Babri Masjid issue. He will have a hard time justifying his volte-face both to his voters and to his own party workers.

Says Sushil Modi, leader of the Opposition in the Bihar Assembly, "Laloo realises that this could be end-game for him. His personal reputation, his political future are at stake. He is a desperate man today and in his desperation, he can do anything to cling on to the reins of power." The BJP leader had fought alongside Laloo during the student movement days in Patna and is now one of his staunchest foes.

Says another friend-turned-foe, BJP leader Ravi Shankar Prasad, "I have known him for years. From our student movement days. I feel he has degenerated in the last couple of years. He is very insecure and now he's capable of doing anything to enjoy the fruits of power."

But the most baffled by this alliance are both RJD and Congress workers in the state. For years they have fought against each other and will now find it difficult to suddenly reverse their mindsets. A number of Congress workers from Bihar even went to Kesri to appeal against the alliance but were apparently turned down.

Bihar Pradesh Congress chief Sarfaraz Ahmad earlier acknowledged the dilemma: "It would be extremely difficult to motivate the party workers to support Laloo Yadav as they have been fighting him on the corruption issue for so long. But..."

AICC member Prem Chand Mishra, who has been suspended from the Bihar Pradesh Congress, shows no such diplomacy and insists that the ill-advised alliance is being thrust on them from the top: "This is the outcome of vested interests of Laloo Prasad and Sitaram Kesri. *Pehle chhup chhup ke pyar tha, ab is love affair ko licence de diya hai Kesri ne* (Earlier, it was clandestine, now the love affair has been given a licence by Kesri). With this, the Lalooisation of the Congress is complete."

Besides, Mishra believes that the Congress stands to lose heavily because of the tie-up. "This alliance has been form-

"Tell everyone to be careful, here comes Laloo"

Laloo Prasad Yadav says he is on a do-or-die mission

SUNDAY: How does it feel to be back?
Laloo Prasad Yadav: I have come out with a mission — to break the communal forces destroying our country. Just because I was away from the scene for some time, these forces have taken things for granted. Not any more. So I am glad that I am back.

Q: What about people within the Janata Dal — Ram Vilas Paswan, Sharad Yadav and Deve Gowda? Do you feel hurt by their betrayal?
A: *Mere mathe pe pagri dekh rahe hain na? Sar pe kafan bandhke aya hoon* (Do you see the turban on my head? I have embarked on a do-or-die mission). I will see to it that Paswan and Sharad Yadav never enter Bihar. Let them go and contest from elsewhere. Even there they will lose. This is what happens to a traitor. Just imagine I made them what they are and today they are abusing me.

"I am forcing her (Rabri Devi) to continue as CM. I have other things to do"

Q: What do you think will be the outcome of the Lok Sabha polls?
A: *Har seat pe Laloo ka stamp rahega* (There will be my stamp on every seat). Go, tell everyone to be careful, here comes Laloo.

Q: How do you justify allying with the Congress?
A: It is a question of who the enemy is. I will align with all those people who are against communalism. The BJP has to be ousted at any cost and for this I am roaming the streets of the country to seek an alliance with like-minded parties. The Congress as it is today, with Kesriji at the helm, is very secular. So why shouldn't I seek their help?

Q: What about the Janata Dal?
A: *Koi Janata Dal hai kya* (Is there a Janata Dal)? They are finished. They can join me if they want. I have given an open offer to Gujralsaab who is a very decent man, to contest from any seat in Bihar. I will ensure his victory.

Q: What about resuming the chief ministership of Bihar?
A: Rabri tells me every day to take over but I am forcing her to continue. *Aur bhi kaam hai hamko* (I have other things to do). •

Interviewed by Pallavi Ghosh/New Delhi

ed for Laloo Yadav's politica' survival. The Congress will be the loser. Our credibility will be destroyed completely."

Mishra may be stretching a point. In the 1996 Lok Sabha polls, the Congress contested all 54 seats in Bihar and won only two. Worse, it forfeited deposits in 39 constituencies. It can hardly get any worse than that. At worst, it will lose even those two seats. At best, even gaining one seat will be an improvement of 50 per cent over its previous performance.

It is for Laloo that the gains are dubious. The Janata Dal contested 44 seats last year and won 22, polling over 30 per cent of the votes. Laloo's breakaway RJD still holds 15 of those seats. These Laloo had won on the basis of strong anti-Congress and anti-BJP rhetoric. Now, disillusionment within the RJD and Congress workers could lead to cross-voting that will benefit the BJP.

The BJP-Samata Party alliance, on the other hand, has been steadily gaining ground In the last elections, the BJP contested 32 seats in Bihar, won 18 and lost its deposit in only one constituency. Samata Party has six seats in hand. Put together, this alliance has as many seats in Bihar as Laloo does and enjoys the advantage of not having one of its prominent members put in jail on charges of corruption.

Even in the subsequent by-polls to ten Assembly seats, the then unified Janata Dal retained six seats while the BJP-Samata Party alliance managed to get four. And though the saffron brigade is cautious when it comes to Laloo, they have definitely been gaining ground in Bihar.

But Laloo, apparently, is intent on the big picture. He desperately wants a national presence and seems willing to take a risk in his own state to achieve that end.

Not many people understand what the Secular Front is all about. What is known is that it has been formed with the intention of keeping the BJP out of power at the Centre. When pushed, the RJD's minorities' commission chairman Irfanullah will haltingly list the Secular Front's agenda: 1) it will treat the Babri Masjid dispute as a property dispute; b) it is not in favour of a uniform civil code: c) it believes in proportional reservation for Muslims.

That is not much of an agenda to win a whole election on. Congress leaders admit that the Front will hardly have any relevance outside of Bihar and will probably be a complete non-starter in UP. So what is this whole noise about?

A lot of this has to do with Laloo himself. When he first became chief minister in 1990, a gleeful Laloo exclaimed, *"Yeh udan khatola to Jagannath Mishra ke liya aaya tha. Par usme ab Laloo udega* (This helicopter had come for Jagannath Mishra— the Congress CM — but now Laloo will fly in it)." At the time most people called him *lallu* (a simpleton).

When Laloo completed his full term in office — the only one to do so in 34 years in Bihar — and came back for a second term, he began to be called Laloo *bhaiyya*. He had earned his respect.

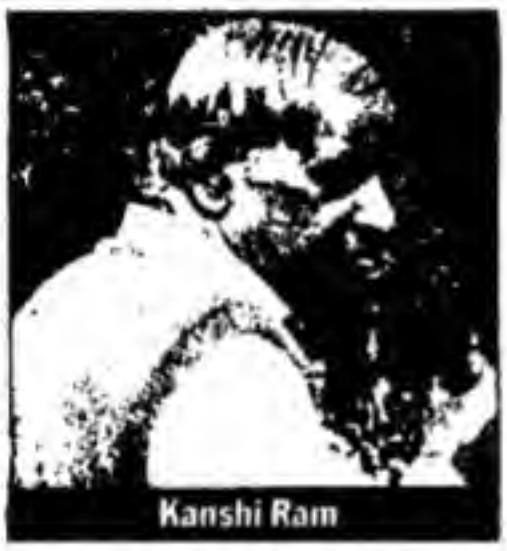
By the 1996 polls, people were calling him 'Raja Sahib'. So, when the Bihari voter began to question him about undelivered promises on developmental programmes, he declared: *"Ab to Dilli ka jung jeetna hai* (We now have to win the battle for Delhi)." That he did, in the form of the Deve Gowda government and declared, "I am the kingmaker."

Laloo had travelled long and hard from the son of a landless labourer to the maker of Prime Ministers. Where else had he to go from there? Some believe he wanted to make the natural progression from kingmaker to king.

Others say the problem is more basic. Laloo is a compulsive actor. He has to perform. And he needs to hear people applaud his rhetoric. Either way, few people realise that one of the problems with acquiring a reputation is that one often has to try very hard to live up to it. And whatever image of himself Laloo may have in mind, you have to grant him one thing — he is trying very hard. •

Naved Zahir/Patna and Pallavi Ghosh/New Delhi

Sitaram Kesri


Kanshi Ram

It is uncertain what form, if any, the Secular Front will take. Though Sitaram Kesri, Kanshi Ram, Ajit Singh and Chandra Shekhar have agreed in principle to the alliance, no one is going overboard with enthusiasm

Chandra Shekhar

Ajit Singh

AICC member Prem Chand Mishra: "The Lalooisation of the Congress is complete"

AMITA MALIK

Cry beloved Calcutta

The city's TV station is in a sorry state of affairs

Can you think of any other TV organisation in the world which would have as chief producer a person who does not understand a word of the local language? Well, this 10th wonder of the world can be found at Calcutta Doordarshan. Making a courtesy call on the telephone, the more I spoke in Bengali, the more he replied courteously enough, in Hindi. At first I thought he was a Hindi chauvinist, so I switched over to English. Then he confessed that he knew neither Bengali nor English.

Seeking an explanation for this amazing situation, I asked the head of the TV station. Well, he said, it was like this. The person concerned was a cameraman, and he was due for a promotion. Since there was no higher post available for a cameraman, he was given the job of chief producer, never mind if he did not know a word of Bengali. Not that the camerawork of the station has improved as a result. The news bulletins alone would get DD Cacutta the lowest marks anywhere.

Still reeling from the impact, I asked a DD veteran in Delhi how this could happen? He said Calcutta is not alone in making these bizarre postings. He said some of DD's finest cameramen (and DD certainly had them once upon a time) are now sitting at desks doing administrative jobs although they are not qualified for that and are badly needed for improving DD's camerawork. He says they love their big desks, their rooms and their peons.

What struck me as very sad was that these fine cameramen did not insist on corresponding promotions in their own special discipline and seem to enjoy sitting at desks being babus for the sake of more money and perks. Equally guilty is Doordarshan for carrying on with a system of promotions which comes straight out of Ruritania. Is this the sort of system which Prasar Bharati wants to perpetuate? Would such a situation be accepted in any professional organisation worth the name? Mr Nikhil Chakravartty and Mr S.S. Gill please note. And cameramen, assertyourselves and insist on a system of promotions where you remain honourable cameraman and do not reduce yourselves to desk babus.

Doordarshan Kendra, Calcutta: the most successful serials shown here are made by outsiders

The other bizarre situation found in Calcutta was that the most successful serials, according to DD's own ratings, are made by outsiders. *Ogo Priyatama* and *Janmabhoomi* are painful to watch. They are a travesty of the medium, with no suggestion of TV technique or original themes. They are simply photographed stage plays acted, directed and with sets in the manner of stage plays of the earlier part of this century.

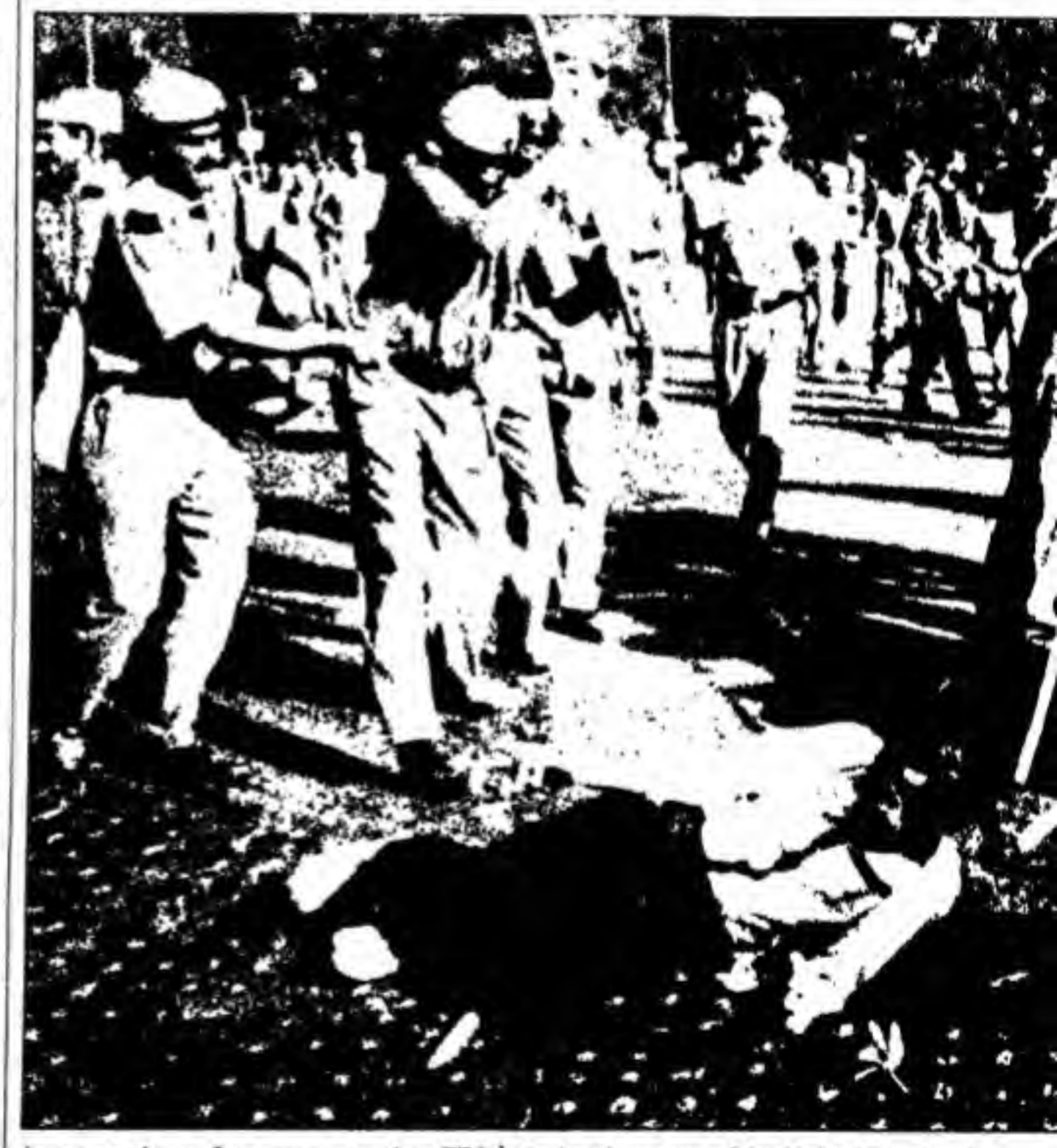
On the other hand, I found the best talent and genuine TV theatre in DD itself. I was particularly impressed by two directors — Kalyan Ghosh, who is an assistant station director in Doordarshan and Nirmal Guha. I saw two of their plays. *Doodher Daam*, based on a short story by noted Bengali writer Banaphool is exquisitely acted out by veteran actress Swapna Mitra and could easily be entered for national and international competitions. *Doodher Daam* is about an old lady travelling in a train. She is harassed by two 'modern' obnoxious honeymooning couples. A porter (played by Satinath Mukhopadhyay with too refined a voice) looks after her and at the end the old lady ticks off the rude youngsters in impeccable English.

The second play is even more unusual. *Pratiksha* is about an encounter between a Bengali, married now to a German woman (Daagmar Daspupta in a fine performance) and Ratna Sarkar, who is superb as the woman he did not marry because of crossing of wires. It is all beautifully understated and very good TV. A lesson for Prasar Bharati, which must not overlook talent within its own gates.

Calcutta DD's news bulletins are the pits. All the women look like schoolmarms in outsized spectacles, sometimes with a heavy necklace for prize distribution day. They all read mindlessly, especially the Urdu newscasters. The backdrop to the news, believe it or not, is white blinds with what I thought was a ladder at the back. But someone said it was Vidyasagar Setu. Calcutta viewers, I weep for you. •

Look back

JNU students produce a film in memory of their comrade Chandrashekhar Prasad



In the commerce-driven world of television and the film industry, *Ek Minute Ka Maun* is an aberration.

Few people will ever see the film because it is outside the commercial grid. But it is a testament of love and faith. Friends and young professionals have made *Ek Minute Ka Maun*, a 72-minute short film in memory of their comrade, Chandrashekhar Prasad, Chandu to his friends. Chandu was shot dead in Siwan, Bihar, along with a colleague, Shyam Narain Yadav, and a roadside cartpuller, Bhuteli Mian, on 31 March last year.

When he came to Jawaharlal Nehru University, Chandu wanted to do a Ph.D. in Politics. He studied Politics but took part in it as well, becoming the president of the students' union twice.

Like many other idealists before him, Chandu began to believe that fringe politics was neither honest, nor enough. He dropped out of JNU and went back to Bihar to work among the poor in Siwan.

He had spent his childhood in a neighbouring village. His mother now lives in that home, watching vigilantly the rough mud memorial, erected where her only son's ashes are buried.

Both Chandrashekhar and Yadav were members of the Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist (Liberation) which has come overground recently and has been making its presence felt in the local electoral and non-electoral politics in Siwan.

Authorities entrusted with finding Chandu's killers argue that it is just a coincidence that Chandrashekhar was shot dead when he had begun to organise campaigns against Laloo Yadav government's fodder scam and the killing of Dalits by the Ranvir Sena. They also term as coincidental reports in the local media that Chandu was killed after a plot was hatched to eliminate him by Shahabuddin — MP, mafia don, gunrunner and criminal in that area. Shahabuddin is a right-hand man of Laloo Prasad Yadav, chief minister of Bihar, and is currently a free man, as the CBI investigates Chandu's murder.

The making of the film is a story in itself. It all began in May last year. The JNU Students' Struggle Coordination Committee decided to document the students' movement which took Delhi by storm last year.

When students got to know of Chandu's murder, they organised a night-long gherao of Bihar Bhavan in Delhi where Laloo Yadav was staying, blockading the roads and breaking barricades. In a perfectly coordinated action, students marched on the road all night, as others formed human chains, stormed the headquarters of the United Front and broke through to the Prime Minister's house. They then marched to Parliament on 11 March, the day the no-confidence motion was being moved against the Deve Gowda government.

The government was in Parliament listening to stories of bitterness and betrayal. But the students were determined to be heard. Police firings and lathicharges followed. Hundreds were injured—heads, legs, eyes and lips were smashed. In May, at the JNU meeting, as student upon student spoke of anger and sorrow, a decision was taken instantly: some of them would make a film.

Without a single paisa in their

in anger

Some of the students who were beaten up while protesting Chandrashekhar's death, contributed in the making of the film

pockets, a group of current and former students resolved to make a film on Chandu and the student uprising that followed his death. Ajay Bharadwaj, a television professional and former JNU student took the responsibility of 'making' the film. He created and designed *Ek Minute Ka Maun*.

It was hot and the sun was high when he started. The first decision was that there would be no sponsors and the film would be non-commercial. And then began the search for material: footage, news footage, footage from the past, stills, clippings, graphics, illustrations, memories and hopes. Doing it was not easy. Especially when so many eyes kept welling up.

The person who came up with wholehearted support was S.P. Singh of *Aaj Tak*.

For three months, this group moved from one television company to another, dug out archives and sought help from friends across the country. In dire financial straits themselves, they sought help from friends and individuals for any amount from Re 1 to Rs 100. Many responded, including journalists, teachers and media professionals. Almost all top television companies donated their share of news footage free. Private production houses dug out old footage on JNU from their libraries with Chandrashekhar's images and speeches. Graphic artists came forward to help out with graphics — painstakingly done without credits or money. Ajay still has to return the money to companies from whom he hired editing tables.

Sunil Kali did the editing which was a long and tiring process — and he didn't even know Chandu. Vineet Bagga came to JNU and shot footage. His camera gives the rains in JNU a special glitter because it followed the dry summer after the murder and the tears hadn't dried when the monsoon came down. Gautam Ghose's music is understated. The tune of *We shall overcome* recurs throughout the film — that and the sound of gunshots.

"This film is open-ended. It is not about memory or catharsis," says director Ajay Bharadwaj.

He says the film doesn't fall into any particular category. It is neither fiction nor docudrama, nor a documentary, nor a straight rehash of news footage. It has images of Chandu's impish smiles, his widowed mother mouthing slogans as she marched with the students to demand punishment for Shahabuddin, pictures of angry and hurt students.

And images of silence. •

Amit Sengupta/New Delhi

Hit wicket

Indian cricketers and selectors should get their act together at least on the field

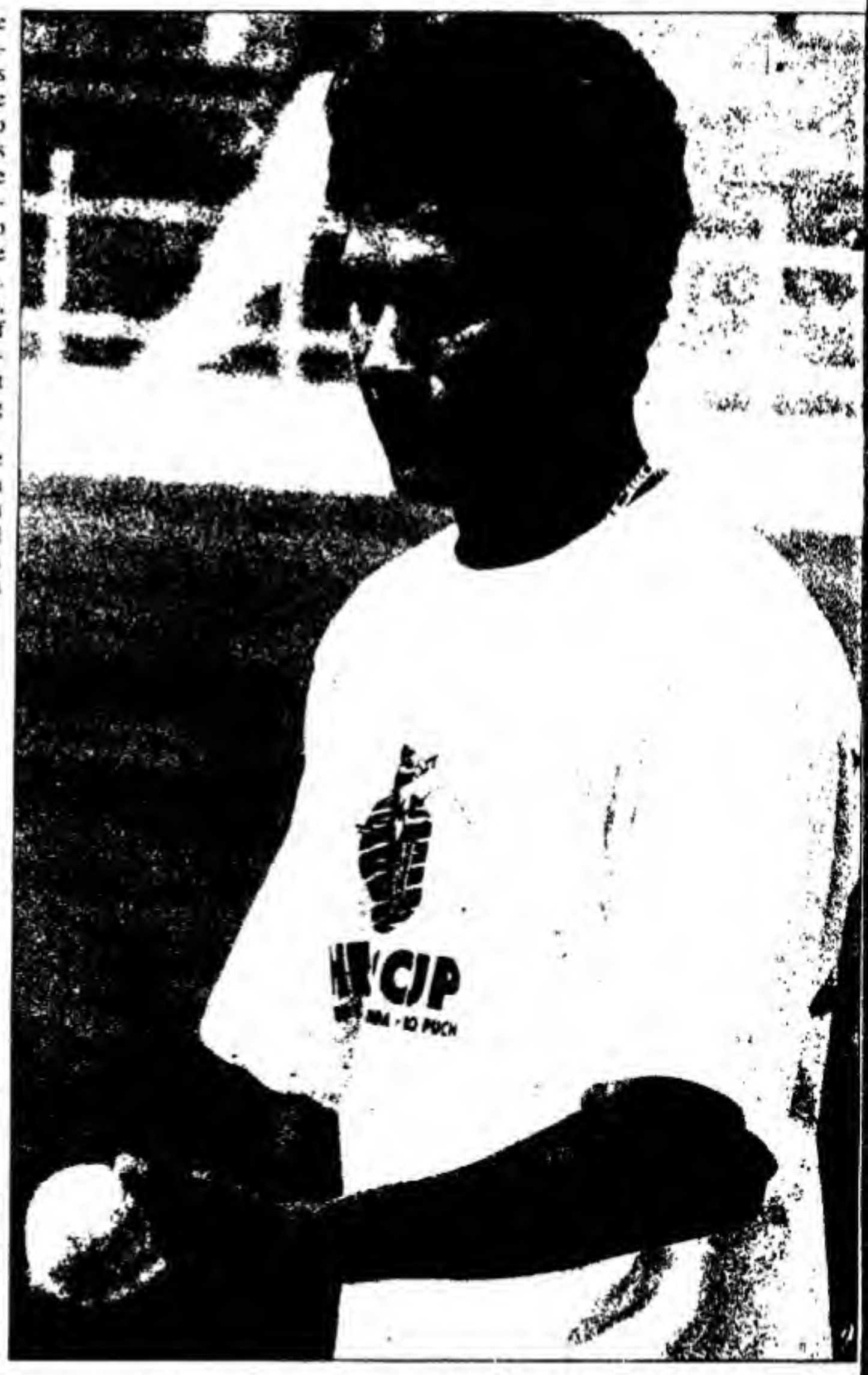
Today's question: can you name the playing eleven of the Indian cricket team? Tomorrow's will probably be: who is the captain? Things have come to such a pass that nobody is sure of his place. Even when it comes to the whole squad, including standbys. The exception, probably, is Sourav Ganguly, who seems safe at least till the end of the Bangladesh tournament in early January.

Indian cricket is at a very low ebb, which will not rise substantially even if Sri Lanka is whitewashed in the limited-overs competition. And its cause has not been helped by the never-ending Chandrachud-Prabhakar feud.

The Justice Chandrachud report to the Board of Control for Cricket in India said that Prabhakar was merely a publicity-seeking individual who had no business in accusing some cricketers of aiding, abetting and participating in a betting circle. The former Test cricketer countered by telling a journalist that the former judge hadn't even asked him to name the person who had approached him to let down his own team for a monetary consideration.

Sachin Tendulkar was neither a hard taskmaster nor a towering personality. The captain did not exhort or admonish the players as they went about their chores listlessly

In a newspaper interview, Justice Chandrachud said he had guaranteed immunity to Prabhakar to name the cricketer who had tried to bribe him. In fact, if the report is accurate, the former judge had opened himself up to a charge of libel by calling Prabhakar a liar.



This bribery issue seems to become more and more sordid as allegations of graft are made against some selectors. While this charge didn't generate too much heat despite the report of two selectors allegedly demanding money from players for their inclusion in the national squad, the one involving the players threatens to continue.

But even that has had to be sidelined by the consistent inconsistency of the Indian team. If the Pakistan tour was disappointing, the Sharjah tournament was a disaster. The impact was greater because the opposition was no better — player for player.

In match after match, the Indians seemed like robots programmed to lose. And nobody seemed the worse for it, at least as much as the players' body language suggested.

Expectedly, the captain came under fire. It was evident, even to the layman, that Sachin Tendulkar was neither a hard taskmaster nor a towering personality on the field. There was no exhortation or even admonition from him as the rest of the players went listlessly about their chores.

The selectors have now kept him on a tight leash, hoping the threat of taking the captaincy away would get him back in action. Unfortunately, Tendulkar had accumulated a string of low scores, just about staying afloat with a big innings every four matches or so.

To make matters worse, a hint of sabotage was injected in some reports of matches, implying that there were two or more "camps" within the Indian team, only one of which was interested in keeping Sachin as its leader. The finger of suspicion was, in some quarters, being pinned on Mohammad Azharuddin. He didn't help his own case by posting indifferent scores and getting run-out at crucial junctures.

Mercifully, the selectors decided to let him off with a stiff reprimand retaining him in the squad against Sri Lanka. But several other players were not so lucky, despite the fact that they hadn't performed too badly.

The tussle for the wicketkeeper's spot has become a musical chairs event. If Saba Karim went on one tour, Nayan Mongia went on the next. It is time the selectors made up their minds. If they wanted a wicketkeeper, the choice, obviously, was Nayan Mongia. If they wanted a wicketkeeper-batsman, then it had to be Karim.

But Karim's case was not as bad as the others. Both Venkatesh Prasad and Abey Kuruvilla were quite unceremoniously shown the door. So were Anil Kumble, Rahul Dravid and Vinod Kambli.

While Kuruvilla hadn't performed well enough to merit inclusion — especially in fielding — very few outside the selectors' circle understood why Prasad was left out.

On home wickets, Kumble can be a match winner. Unfortunately, his efforts abroad were taken into account. This is not to belittle Sairaj Bahutule, the conventional leg-spinner who acquitted himself quite well in his debut against

Anshuman Gaekwad: stop squabbling

Sri Lanka. But it is difficult to believe that Kumble's days are over.

Dravid's case is interesting. He is considered to be one of the best batsmen in the country. It is felt in some quarters that he is too slow for limited-overs cricket. This is fallacious, because a One-dayer is not a licence to go into overdrive. There are times in every match when the batting side needs a player who can stay at the wicket.

If Dravid's case is interesting, Kambli's is intriguing, to say the least. He was taken to Sharjah but didn't get to play. Although his inclusion in the last match, against the West Indies, was considered, he had an injury which ruled him out. The fact remains that he wasn't given a chance.

While the selectors may have goofed up in a few cases, their worst choice may well have been Madan Lal's replacement. Anshuman Gaekwad was never a very distinguished batsman. Or even a great theoretician. What he does have is an ascerbic tongue.

He has already stated that he doesn't like the fact that he cannot have a hand in team selections. But his bombshell was the remark that the changes he effected in the batting order were for reasons that people not knowing cricket wouldn't understand. Among such people were Messrs Geoffrey Boycott and Sunil Gavaskar.

While this could qualify as one of the best jokes of the year, his unwarranted

Anil Kumble: over the hill?

criticism of Ganguly was met with such a stern rebuff that he was forced to shut up. But may be this is part of his game plan to exercise total control over the team and extract concessions from the selectors. He was obviously trying to build up his own case should the team fare badly.

Gaekwad should quit quibbling and concentrate on India's performance. He could begin by conserving the energy of his bowlers during their 10-over stints by placing them within the 30-yard circle. Long-arm throws from the outfield, coupled with yards and yards of running, could take the stuffing out of bowlers. This would be more in line with his job than trying a jab at former players who were far better than he could ever have been. •

Arijit Sen/Calcutta

"We are willing to forget votes and self-interest"

Sri Lanka's minister for constitutional law on his government's initiative to defuse the Tamil crisis

For nearly ten years now, armies have attempted to root them out. But like a gigantic hydra which grows a new head the moment one is chopped off, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have defied military efforts to bring north and east Sri Lanka into the pale of overground Sri Lankan politics. One of their demands has been the recognition of the Tamil Eelam (state) by Sri Lanka through the merger of the northern and eastern provinces in the tiny island, so that the Tamils have a 'historical habitation' of their own.

The task of drawing up a new constitution so that the Tamils' demand for devolution of power is met, fell to Professor G.L. Peiris, minister for constitutional law in Sri Lanka, who is also a renowned scholar.

Prof Peiris headed the parliamentary select committee, appointed by Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunge, which submitted the draft of a new constitution on 24 October this year. In this interview to SUNDAY, he talks about the Tamil problem and the solution offered by the People's Alliance (PA) government.

SUNDAY: The people of the north and east say Colombo's intentions of resolving the Tamil issue are always suspect. What is the evidence of your sincerity?

Professor Peiris: The willingness to frontally address core issues (of the Tamil problem) has not been popular with the Sinhalese people. The present government too, depends on the votes of the Sinhalese to stay on in power. So if the ruling party is willing to risk its power base, by adopting attitudes and postures which win back the confidence of the Tamil people, this itself is evidence of our sincerity.

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) had depended on the rural Sinhala-speaking masses to win elections. Today we are offering police power to the Tamils, we are departing from the unitary state to give power to the Tamils. The ruling party is willing to forget votes and self-interest to solve the problem.

We have adopted the principle that regional councils are autonomous within the areas of authority allocated to them. No longer can the central government shove its way into the provincial government. We have an 'opting out' clause by which no decision can be imposed on a regional council without its assent, regardless of the central government's majority in Parliament.

Tamil militancy: a festering sore

The regional council can 'opt out' of a decision of Parliament if it doesn't suit it.

We have abolished the concurrent list, so that issues like healthcare, which were on the concurrent list, are not reappropriated by the Centre on the ground that they are national issues. The concurrent list was no man's land, one of the levers which could be pulled to dilute the devolution of power to the provinces.

The minorities have an assurance that we are interested in setting up a stable structure which can't be dismantled. This is the greatest evidence of our sincerity.

Q: What is the greatest threat, the sword of Damocles if you like, which hangs above the provincial councils today?

A: The dissolution clause, in the event of a threat to national security.

All of what we're trying to do is social engineering. But self-protection is part of the organic law of any state. No entity in a state can act to destabilise the whole state.

The powers given to the regional council are well-entrenched. They will not be adopted by ordinary legislation, but by procedures most rigid. We have given regional councils power, but have also guarded against the abuse of authority. So if the powers of a regional council are exercised so as to threaten stability, the Centre has the power to dissolve the regional council.

The powers of dissolution are circumscribed. They are to be used in an extreme situation. If they are used arbitrarily, they are justiciable. The chief ministers' conference will be the forum for arbitration. If a chief minister is not satisfied, he can go before the Supreme Court and plead that the exercise of authority was *ultra vires* and prove that the motivation of the executive was questionable.

"The minorities have an assurance that we are interested in setting up a stable structure which can't be dismantled — the greatest evidence of our sincerity"

Q: Would you say that the demands made at the Thimpu meeting have been addressed?

A: At the Thimpu meeting, the demand was raised for a Tamil homeland or a Tamil nation. Neither we nor any other government can ever agree to that. But the elements of an ideology which refer to legitimate grievances, which are rooted in history, can be addressed.

For instance, we recognise that the unit of devolution should be a province. We recognise that districts should be joined (subject to affirmation by the residents), and that the predominantly Tamil-speaking areas should be joined to the north because they are connected to it.

So after Thimpu, what was practical has been taken on board.

But there are administrative issues which cannot be subjects of a constitution. The issue of a separate identity, grievances about identity...these are administrative issues. Quotas in education, an ombudsman, the official languages commission...all these administrative steps have already been taken.

The new constitution waters down Article 76 in the earlier unitary constitution to confer limited legislative powers on regional councils.

Q: In the process of joining the northern and eastern provinces, what happens to the Tamils of Amparai?

A: We decided to ask the people of Batticaloa and Trincomalee whether they want to merge with the northern province. But then, Mr Ashroff of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) said that the merger should take into account the demands of the Muslims and sought a separate Muslim province.

At first, he wanted a district for the Muslims without the principle of contiguity. But after every three Tamil or Sinhalese village in the east is one Muslim village. Ashroff's Muslim province would have been an administrative nightmare.

Now he has been persuaded to wait until the referendum. If the referendum is in favour of the merger of the north and east, then the matter rests there. But if not, then some kind of weighted representation will have to be given to the Muslims.

As for Amparai, 98 per cent of the population is Sinhalese. There is no sense in joining Amparai with Jaffna.

The point is, the eastern province is not a homogenous one. So it is important to take everyone into account. •

Interviewed by Aditi Phadnis/New Delhi

BOOK OF THE WEEK

Jinxed at Jaffna

India's Sri Lanka policy was correct but its implementation flawed, argues J.N. Dixit

Rajiv Gandhi and Jayewardene sign the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord in 1987

In his book, *Assignment Colombo*, J N. Dixit argues that India's involvement (not interference) in Sri Lanka was not only inevitable, but justified. By the same token of his own line of arguments, it was also doomed to failure. The revelations in Dixit's book are bold, courageous and full of conviction and candour in strenuously arriving at the bottom line: India's Sri Lanka policy was correct, but its implementation flawed. With the same benefit of hindsight as used by Dixit, this assessment is questionable.

Because the view from the other side of the hill is that external and internal threats to national security were exaggerated, as the real threat was to India's sphere of influence *a la* Indira Doctrine. Further, it was not so much the failure of the military campaign of the IPKF as it was the failure of coercive diplomacy which Dixit calls "the failure of foreign policy"

Given the fact that the assumptions, anticipations, even assessment and advocacies on which the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement (ISLA) was constructed were inaccurate (Dixit refers to these inadequacies in the book), the consequential policy decisions had a hopeless chance of succeeding in implementing the agreement. Yet, only a man as cerebral and gutsy as Dixit could have made a go of it, spearheading the complex operation of reconciling the aspirations of the Sri Lankan Tamils (not for Eelam) within the parameters of the security interests of both India and Sri Lanka.

Initially, as member of the Defence Planning Staff, and later as one of the commanders in the IPKF, I was part of the team which suffered a double insult. First, being served eviction orders by the head of the country which invited the IPKF; and second, on return from Trincomalee to Madras, the ignominious welcome as ITKF—Indian Tamil Killing Force.

> It was not so much the failure of the military campaign of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force as it was the failure of coercive diplomacy which Dixit calls "the failure of foreign policy"

All this and other frustrations may have been averted Dixit says in the last chapter of his unputdownable book, had this happened or that not happened among the many imponderables around the mission. One of the key reasons which precipitated the failure of ISLA was the change of high commissioners in Colombo at a very critical time when power was being devolved to the north east provincial council.

In fact, Dixit spent much of his last three months till he left Colombo on 9 April, 1989 on leave in Delhi. Lakhan Mehrotra who succeeded Dixit not only did not have the "stomach for the job" but was also the complete antithesis of Dixit. One of his first questions on a visit to IPKF headquarters in Trincomalee was: "What does LTTE (the acronym) mean?" Lt Gen. A.S. Kalkat going on leave shortly after Dixit's departure also had an adverse effect on the ground situation relating to the enforcement of the accord.

Once Dixit was removed from the political hotbed of Colombo, the saboteurs of the accord went into full swing. Immediately after taking over, President Premadasa demanded the withdrawal of the IPKF, issuing orders to the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) to evict it if it did not leave by 31 September, 1989. The face-off was defused by a token withdrawal followed by the total pull-out of IPKF

on 24 March, 1990

Assignment Colombo is a blow-by-blow first-hand account of Sri Lankan events from May 1985 to April 1989. Dixit viewed later events and developments from Islamabad as ambassador to Pakistan and from Delhi as foreign secretary till end January 1994. He does not drop his reader midstream but updates the book, enhancing its value at a time when the M.C. Jain Commission Report has rekindled India's Sri Lanka chapter.

LTTE leader Prabhakaran

Dixit traces the genesis of India's involvement in Sri Lanka for meeting Tamil aspirations within the majority Sinhala polity, recounts the tortuous process of crafting the ISLA, explains the induction of IPKF as a means for its implementation, reveals the tragic play of forces which dismantled the agreement and outlines the post-IPKF withdrawal and ISLA developments. The last two chapters called Dramatis Personae and Why Did India Fail are a brilliant synopsis of the book.

India had hoped that in return for helping Sri Lanka in its ethnic conflict, the latter would accomodate India's security concerns. Unfortunately, the accord reeked of deceit, duplicity, intrigue and subterfuge. Each party to the accord had its hidden agenda which the other knew. Batting for Sri Lanka were intrigue-masters R. Premadasa and Lalith Athulathmudali, in cahoots with the Tamil Tigers, all three working with the common minimum programme of scuttling the accord by evicting the IPKF.

The LTTE's design of battle was to buy time, avoid confrontation with the IPKF who, it knew quite early in the day, would have to leave and then take on its ultimate foe, the SLA.

Dixit does not explain why foreign minister P.V. Narasimha Rao's sagely three-point advice not to rush into the accord was overlooked, nor why Prabhakaran, who was indecisive about it, changed his mind altogether on it, while transiting from Madras to Delhi. Or how N. Ram of *The Hindu* became a conduit for the LTTE's peace overtures; or why India supported Premadasa's presidency.

Three events which were seen to be directly responsible for the LTTE reneging on the promised surrender of weapons and turning their guns on the IPKF were — Thileepan's fast-unto-death on the non-implementation of the ISLA, the non-acceptance by President Jayewardene of Prabhakaran's nominee, N. Padhmanathan as the interim administrator of the provincial council and what Dixit calls the engineered suicide of Pulendran.

The person who would have first-hand knowledge of these incidents is Maj. Gen. Harkirat Singh, who reached Jaffna on 30 July, 1987. Dixit and Harkirat fell out before things on the ground fell apart. Dixit found Harkirat procedural, wooden and politically unimaginative. He also botched the operation to capture Prabhakaran in Jaffna University.

In his unpublicised rebuttal, Harkirat has a substantially different account. In fact, he disowns most of the conversation recorded in the book purportedly between him and Dixit. The tragic Pulendran episode, according to Harkirat, happened because the orders he received through his operations channels were to hand over Pulendran to the SLA. "Pulendran was already in my custody. So there was no question of refusing to take charge of Pulendran as Dixit claims," says Harkirat.

Harkirat claims that it was he who on 5 August, 1987 got Prabhakaran to sign the first and only document: "I will make a statement in my rally in Jaffna that I will surrender arms." This was one better than Dixit obtaining Prabhakaran's acquiescence on the agreed minutes of discussions between Dixit and Prabhakaran from 26 to 28 September which the latter did not sign. According to Harkirat, Dixit's reaction to the 5 August document was: "General, what you have achieved

IPKF jawans meet Prime Minister V.P. Singh on return to India

the nation will remember. I speak on behalf of the Prime Minister." This incident finds no mention in the book. Harkirat's removal from command in Jatfna, it is clear, was at Dixit's behest.

Dixit suggests that implicit in the accord was the guarantee from India to bring Tamil militancy to an end and if required, also provide help against the JVP. For the IPKF, this was a tall order given the huge handicaps with which it was functioning. Dixit admits that "negative undercurrents" and a "narrower institutional dimension" of the IPKF of its task undermined operational efficiency. Further, this was due to the flawed premise that there would be no large-scale military involvement to enforce the ISLA.

Maj. General Harkirat Singh

Dixit is full of praise for the IPKF, singling it out among all agencies involved in Sri Lanka as the only one which acted in national interest. He indirectly blames Army Chief General K. Sundarji for not fully preparing the IPKF for its politico-military mission. It was rushed in without multi-dimensional briefings and without comprehending the political nuances of the task given.

Sundarji believed he could rein in the LTTE within two weeks, at the most, three or four weeks. This was a grave underestimation of the LTTE's organisational and military capacities. Sundarji was lulled into this miscalculation by R&AW who treated the LTTE guerrillas as its backroom boys.

The third person at the receiving end of Dixit's stick is foreign secretary Romesh Bhandari who comes out in clowning glory. But the chief culprit on the Indian side is R&AW. And this comes out very clearly in Dixit's book. Dixit's declaration of India as a soft state and losing its credibility as a regional mediator is a timely obituary for the Gujral Doctrine.

Dixit's report cards on the key personalities involved in the Indo-Sri Lanka tangle between 1983 and 1989 are masterly. The list begins with the overarching figure of Jayewardene, followed by S. Bandaranaike, Lalith Athulathmudali, Gamini Dissanayake, Amirthalingam, Thondaman, Prabhakaran, Ranjan Wijeratne and Varadaraj Perumal.

Dixit has a persuasive and powerful pen. It is his contention that "had the IPKF been given another six months or so, the LTTE would have been under sufficient pressure to give up violence and join the mainstream of politics. The withdrawal of IPKF de facto scuttled the ISLA." Sundarji was proved wrong in his confident assertion that the LTTE would be neutralised in two weeks. Dixit's wishful six-month timetable would have met the same fate. •

Major-General Ashok K. Mehta

The reviewer was a general officer commanding of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (South) in north-eastern Sri Lanka. He is also a founder member of the Defence Planning Staff of the Chiefs of Staff Committee

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Assignment Colombo *by J.N. Dixit. Published by Konark Publishers. Price: Rs 400*

KHAAS BAAT

Ramoji Rao's film city in Hyderabad has been admired for various reasons. But not many people realise that it has achieved what was earlier considered impossible: making Govinda report on time on the sets.

And how did this miracle

GOVINDA

take place? Simple. Govinda, like all the other stars, was staying in one of the hotels in film city. So all the producers had to do was to shake him awake and frog-march him to the sets.

Small wonder then that all of Govinda's producers are queueing up to shoot at Rao's film city.

But while Govinda has been suitably disciplined, Sunny Deol continues to run riot — even at the film city. He refused point-blank to stay on the premises, asking to be booked into a five-star hotel instead. The producer obliged.

But Deol wasn't finished. He then declared that he wouldn't report on the sets unless an Opel Astra was sent to fetch him.

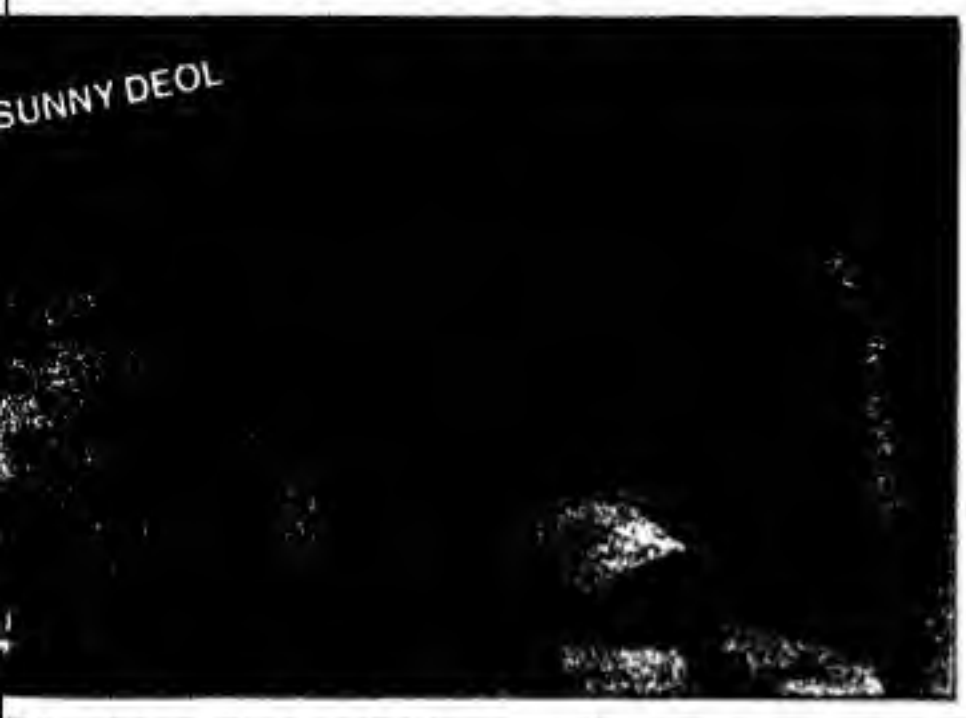
Sunny, however, had reckoned without the ever-resourceful Ramoji Rao, who immediately requisitioned the afore-mentioned car and sent it to Deol's hotel.

After that, the poor man had little alternative but to report for shooting, tail firmly between his legs.

Manisha Koirala would do well to get her personal life in order. These days the actress is the bane of every producer's life, because of her propensity to report late for shooting — and that too in such a condition that it is impossible to take a single close-up of hers.

Apparently, everyone is ascribing this aberrant behaviour to too many late nights and too much drink in the company of her new friend DJ. But what has everyone perplexed is the number of bruises the actress boasts of these days.

Is she, by any chance, becoming one of those women who walk into doors? •


SUNNY DEOL

MANISHA KOIRALA

The Mehndi

Daler Mehndi is the undisputed king of Punjabi pop

In the year 1995, a short, portly singer of Punjabi songs was whipping up mass hysteria. Impromptu *bhangras*, flying kisses, chorus singing had become part and parcel of his concerts. And no, it wasn't just the hoi polloi swaying to the brisk Punjabi beats. Even some of the creme de la creme were ready to eat out of his hands.

This was Daler Mehndi who had just released his debut album *Bolo Ta Ra Ra Ra*. It went on to be a chartbuster and there was no looking back. There have been many before him and several after, but Mehndi carved a niche for himself and is, at present, the indisputable king of Punjabi pop.

He belongs to that quaint genre of singers who can make the crowd go into raptures by simply being what he is — a typical 'son of the soil'. Not for him a freaky streaked hairstyle or funky clothes. He wears jeans, topped with an intricately-designed kurta. Always.

The only concession to Punjab being his turban — and his accent.

Rustic, at times vain, smaller in frame than what he appears on television and live shows, the pop *'munda'* was born Daku Daler Singh. "My mother saw a movie called *Gowa* when she was pregnant and was impressed by its hero named Daku Daler who was a dacoit with a golden heart."

And what about the Mehndi part of it? "My elder brother, Amarjeet Singh, met renowned singer Parvez Mehendi's brother in London. When the latter showed off his brother's fame, Amarjeet could not hold himself back. He retaliated strongly, "So what if you are Parvez Mehendi's brother? I am Daler Mehndi's brother."

So was born Daler Mehndi. Life after that was not really a struggle. He chucked his job as a taxi driver in America and returned to India at the age of 18. In 1991 he formed a music group and by 1993 he was quite famous in Delhi. He cut his first album in 1995. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Mehndi was catapulted to fame instantly. All his songs — in many of which he liberally mixed English words with Punjabi — have topped the charts. His first hit album was followed by two mega-hits — *Kardi rab rab kardi* in 1996 and his latest *Ho jaegi baley baley* in 1997. To say nothing of his best-known *Nana na na na re na re* from the film *Mrityudaata* where he somewhat overshadowed the mighty Amitabh Bachchan. Mehndi bagged Channel V's award for the best Indian (male) pop singer in 1996 followed by another award in 1997.

But he wouldn't want to share the credit with MTV or any other channel for promoting him. He has full faith in his abilities as a crowd-puller. "People go mad when they see my live shows," he says. His fame has spilled over to the neighbouring countries — "Sri Lanka, Nepal, and now Pakistan where I have just come back from. Everyone is crazy about me." And he is not exaggerating.

Now his ambition is to have a star named after him. "Like there is the Dhruv star (the pole star), there should be a Daler star too," says Mehndi looking heavenwards. Well, whoever said the sky is the limit should think again.

At the moment, however, the would-be-star has his feet planted firmly in the earth. He admits he has a a long way to go before he reaches the top — "another seven to eight years and the entire world will sing in one *sur* and *taal* with me."

But will any other singer share the pinnacle with him? "No, no, no ... by 2000 AD, all these fly-by-night operators will vanish." Clearly, Mehndi doesn't foresee much competition in the coming years.

He has a sound base and he knows it.

truth has to be depicted. I know people love me and so I have designed some posters with my team." The posters bear messages like "Yo — I'm back from the Daler M show and I have survived" and "Where are my fellow earthlings? I'm back from a Daler Mehndi show".

Mehndi is saddened by the ephemeral world. "Everything comes to an end when a man dies. Why did we get sent here if we have to leave?" he asks, simple-mindedly. "This is the wrong thing which God has done. Look at poor Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan — he built a house for himself which he could not live in."

He has a word of advice for the almighty though. "If God wants to punish people, he should send them away from the earth for five to ten years and then return them."

A fit punishment for some of his crazy fans, perhaps — the ones that will stop at nothing. But then, there are those who make all his efforts seem worthwhile. He rubs his hands in glee as he narrates the story of a 90-year-old woman who was in tears after one of his performances.

Does he feel that he is 'in' today? Not really. That will be the day "when the police will have to be called in to control a crowd when I go to a railway station. Or a train is held up because of me." That's when Mehndi will have truly arrived.

But even though he's not part of the big league yet (that's what he claims), he has already made big money, which keeps steadily pouring in. And all of it is not spent on earthly possessions. A substantial portion goes to charity via the entertainment company set up by him. Charity shows for street children were held and contributions have been made to the chief minister's fund in Kashmir.

But he still seems to have a lot more funds to dispense with. So the next best thing, he feels, would be to plant many trees. "It is my wish that when I get off a train or bus anywhere in India, there are trees, flowers and perfume on all sides, specially that of *neem* and *tulsi*."

What about *sarson* (mustard) — the quintessential ingredient of Punjabi food which gives it that special flavour? Mehndi nods — as if in a dream. His mind is somewhere among the sprawling yellow fields, or maybe among the stars. •

Pallavi Ghosh/New Delhi

Magic

He was trained in classical music, which he imbibed from his mother. "My career in music was decided when I was in my mother's womb," he says. "At that time she was taking lessons in classical music. My father started teaching when I was five. But the biggest force in my life after my mother was my Ustadji Rahat Ali Khan of the Patiala *gharana*. He told me to appreciate everything."

And how long does he think his popular appeal will last? Malkait Singh of *Tutak tutak tutiyan*-fame was considered something of a phenomenon in the early Nineties? One never hears of him these days. Mehndi looks extremely surprised. How could one even suggest such a thing? People forget Daler — never.

But then, he's taking no chances either. Mehndi is all set to unleash an aggressive marketing spiel. "See, the

Daler Mehndi belongs to that quaint genre of singers who can make the crowd go into raptures by simply being what he is — a typical son of the soil

KARNATAKA

Language barrier

The Kannadiga movement is revived in Bangalore

What is the difference between linguistic chauvinism and pragmatic pride? Just a fine line, realises Chandrashekar Patil, chairman of the Kannada Development Authority (KDA), who has launched a highly-visible campaign to give prominence to the Kannada language in the state.

The first step of his operations has been the pulling down of English name-boards of business establishments in Bangalore. They have to be redone with the names figuring prominently in Kannada, alongside English or any other language, insists the KDA.

Though there is nothing untoward about Patil's step — he is merely ensuring the implementation of a law which states that Kannada should be given primacy — it has, predictably enough, raised the bogey of 'rising linguistic chauvinism' in Karnataka.

The issue of name-boards is a minor one in itself. So is the 'mistaken' burning of copies of an English newspaper at a Kannada conference. The important one is: does insisting that the local language get prominence amount to chauvinism? That the question, which is hardly an issue in other states, should even be asked, says a lot about the situation of Kannada and Karnataka.

Ramji Chandran, a non-Kannadiga himself, argues that the language of the land should always get priority. "If the French government insists on everything being in Francaise," he draws a parallel, "it is because the government seeks to serve the interests of its most common citizen so that he is not excluded from any part of life or society in his own land. So you see French everywhere, from application forms, to ad-hoardings and sign-boards of shops. So, why not Kannada in Karnataka?"

But Chandran, editor-publisher of the popular English magazine *Bangalore Monthly*, will find few supporters in the much-touted 'cosmopolitan' Bangalore. For one, non-Kannadigas outnumber Kannadigas in the state capital. And secondly, the obliging nature of the Kannadigas, that allows others to converse in any language other than Kannada them, has ensured that the state language hardly figures in any walk of life in the city.

"I have friends who learnt fluent French within a year of living in Paris," says Chandran, who can converse in but not read or write Kannada. "But the same people do not know a word of Kannada despite living in Bangalore for a number of years. This is because many find it unnecessary to learn what they call 'the local language of the Karnatakans'."

Which is why even though an American like Ron Somers, managing director of the Cogentrix power plant, makes it a point to not just learn but also speak the language, most Indians who have migrated to Bangalore from elsewhere do not bother to pick up even a few words of the local language. "I don't need to know Kannada, so I haven't learnt it," declares a senior executive of an international computer firm who has lived in Bangalore for more than five years now.

That is precisely the kind of attitude which irks people like M.G. Sathyanarayana. "There should be no question of not wanting to learn Kannada," says the advertising professional. "An atmosphere should be created where knowing Kannada will become essential to conduct business or even just survive here."

WAR OF WORDS *Vatal Nagaraj, leader of the Kannada Chaluvali Paksha, defaces a hoarding*

K. VENKATESH

That is what the state government has been trying to do since it declared Kannada as the official language of administration in the state in 1963. But the issue really came to the fore almost two decades ago with the statewide agitation to implement the recommendations of the Gokak report so that Kannada would get prominence in the state. The setting up of the KDA in 1992 was one of the measures taken by the government.

SAY NO TO ENGLISH: *members of the Kannada Development Authority in action*

The KDA has four objectives: implementation of Kannada as the primary language, reservation of jobs for Kannadigas according to the recommendations of the Sarojini Mahishi Committee Report, prominence to Kannada in educational institutions, and use of Kannada by cultural bodies receiving grants from the state government.

HARDLINER: *KDA chairman Chandrashekar Patil*

Chandrashekar Patil will soon be launching a movement regading reservation of jobs for Kannadigas. According to the Mahishi report, which has been gathering dust for the past 11 years, any new enterprise in the state should reserve for Kannadigas 60 per cent of its 'A' category, 85 per cent of its 'B' category, and 100 per cent of its 'C' and 'D' category jobs.

"It is a terrible policy," says the head of a software firm. "We can't find Kannadigas to suit all kinds of jobs If this becomes a reality, people will not invest in the state."

Patil, however, does not consider it at all illogical. "When someone comes here to set up an industry, he gets help from the state government in processing his application. He gets land, power, water, and even loans from local banks. After all that, it is our right to demand a share of the cake. If Kannadigas do not benefit from the development of Karnataka in terms of jobs, what is the whole point? We are certainly not asking for the stars," asserts the KDA chairman.

But few non-Kannadigas would agree with Patil. "I think chauvinism of the non-creative kind is definitely on the rise," says noted Kannada poet Ramachandra Sharma."This is a matter of great shame and concern. Especially since it will certainly not enrich or develop the Kannada language."

Chandrashekar Patil, who now stands accused by non-Kannadigas of pandering to Kannadiga chauvinism, scoffs at Sharma and other critics. "There is nothing creative about a linguistic environment. It is a single cultural entity," he says.

The former English professor and head of the department at the Dharwad University makes it clear that he is not against other languages. "I realise the importance of Hindi as the national link and English as the international link. I cannot afford to be 'anti' either of them. But it is my right to insist that the local language anywhere should get priority," says Patil.

In the latest edition of *Bangalore Monthly*, Ramji Chandran suggests that people living in Bangalore would only benefit from learning Kannada. If people are apathetic or resistant, he warns, the campaign for Kannada will soon be "expressed thus: I am not asking you, I am telling you".

"I think our language policy asking for prominence to Kannada is quite logical and moderate," says Patil. "If some want to call that chauvinism, let them. If they can learn to say it in good-enough Kannada, all the better!"

Jokes apart, the KDA chairman means business. If non-Kannadigas do resist Kannada, Patil threatens to launch a new campaign. His slogan: "If you don't want Kannada, Kannadigas don't want you". Period. •

Gauri Lankesh/Bangalore

WEST BENGAL

Trial and tribulation

The Calcutta High Court rejects an appeal by six undertrials in the Purulia armsdrop case

In a way, the verdict was not unexpected. On 17 December, Justice Nure Alam Chowdhury of Calcutta High Court ordered that the plea to quash the framing of charges, made by the six undertrials in the Purulia armsdrop case, was rejected.

In his nine-page judgement, Justice Chowdhury observed that on the basis of materials placed before his court, there was no "justifiable reason to quash the charges framed against the petitioner Peter Bleach" and others.

He also directed the trial court — in this case, the 4th Bench of the city civil and sessions court — to complete the trial as expeditiously as possible, even "without any adjournment if not otherwise inconvenienced...".

Their appeal having been disposed of, British arms-dealer Peter Bleach, along with five Latvian crew of the rogue An-26 aircraft and another Indian called Vinay Singh, is to go on trial for the Purulia armsdrop case from 27 January '98.

Two years have already passed since a large cache of arms and ammunition was dropped over desolate Purulia in West Bengal on the chilly night of 17 December, 1995. But the trial of Bleach and the others is yet to start. In June, 1997, Bleach had appealed to the High Court for quashing of charges against him.

The CBI, which has been investigating the case, had

MAN IN BLACK: *Peter Bleach*

brought ten charges against Bleach and the others under various sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Apart from the IPC, charges were also framed under the Arms Act, Indian Explosives Act, Explosive Substances Act and the Aircraft Act

But in June, Bleach appealed to the Calcutta High Court for quashing of the charges. Bleach had argued that no prima facie case exists against him and that the trial had wrongly interpreted sections of the IPC referring to waging war against the state.

In his 35-page petition, Bleach had also alleged that the CBI was withholding vital information from the court and that India's premier investigating agency was also misleading the court by submitting false evidence.

The plea of Vinay Singh — brother of the accused Randy, and the only Indian arrested in the case — to quash charges was based on three arguments. It was pointed out that Vinay was taken into custody merely to secure the arrest of his brother. Moreover, charges framed by the CBI in the supplementary charge-sheet — Vinay was not named in the original charge-sheet — were contrary to the material evidence against Vinay.

What was the material evidence? The charge against Vinay was that he was moving about in the armsdrop area on his motorcycle prior to the incident. But the defence for Vinay has argued that is was not enough to arrest a person merely because he was seen loitering near the crime scene, especially when one does not know when and where a crime is going to take place.

It has been pointed out that Vinay was seen in the company

PHADIP ADAK

PLEADING NOT GUILTY: *Vinay Singh being produced in court*

Voices in the wilderness

A fact-finding commission conducts public hearings to study the plight of industrial workers in West Bengal

The country, we are told, is on the path of rapid industrial growth. The new economic policy has been on the rails for about seven years now. The open doors have brought in a flood of foreign investments.

After a long time, the industrial scenario in West Bengal is looking up, too, thanks to the Left Front government's faithful following of the new course.

But has there been any new deal for the workers? With the number of sick and closed units growing, and the traditional sectors fading out, has the 'exit policy' introduced in order to make way for the 'sunrise industries' been able to kindle any hope?

Nagarik Mancha, a Calcutta-based labour support group, in association with several trade unions including the INTUC, FCMU (affiliated to AITUC), HMS, UTUC, TUCC, AWBSRU, etc., set up a fact-finding commission recently to comprehend the situation.

The commission, chaired by Rajinder Sachar, retired chief justice of Delhi High Court and UN special rapporteur on Housing, comprised well-known lawyers, economists, scientists, technologists, industry experts etc.

A series of public hearings was conducted by the commission in Calcutta where witnesses were called from the workers, employers, government and the Provident Fund and Employees' State Insurance authorities. In the first phase, the cases of 64 units were covered.

"What has hit us most in course of such public hearings is the lack of concern for workers and their plight — far worse than the minimum scenario envisaged even within the limits of existing laws," observed Justice Sachar. Nobody was talking of revolution or radicalism. "In many cases workers' minimum rights were violated recurrently even flouting the court orders," he added. Interestingly, the commission did not come across a single case of industrial sickness caused by labour unrest.

FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT: *Justice (retd) Rajinder Sachar*

Some of the other findings are:

• There are several lacunae and weaknesses in the labour laws, and injudicious application often defeats the very purpose

of accused persons and that Ananda Margi literature was found in his possession. Moreover, Vinay was seen posing with an air-gun in a photograph. The counsel for defence has argued that none of these instances is enough to connect a person to the crime per se.

But more seriously, as Arup Chatterjee, counsel for Vinay Singh, has pointed out. there seems to be no sanction to prosecute his client by the Government of India which is needed under Section 196. "When the crime is against the Government of India (charged under Section 121 and 121A, i.e. waging war against Government of India) how can you frame charges with sanction from the state government?" argued Chatterjee.

Legal circles feel that Vinay Singh has a fair chance of getting himself off the hook in case he moves an appeal against the High Court order and goes to Supreme Court. And this is precisely what he is likely to do.

As it stands, after two long years, the trial is ready to begin for the Purulia armsdrop case. It is going to be a long and arduous process, with the key accused persons not being nabbed.

Morover, the CBI has done precious little to go into the conspiracy angle of the case. Sources reveal that the investigating team has not been able to interrogate key persons. Also, with Interpol setting up a task force to probe the Purulia armsdrop case, the investigation, some people say, may be buried under the police files of several countries.

So even after Bleach and Co. go up for trial on 27 January, 1998, it maybe quite some time before the case is cracked. •

Sourabh Sen/Calcutta

of the laws.

• Minimum wages in many industries, especially rice, oil and paper mills and glass factories, have not been revised for more than a decade.

• Non-payment of Provident Fund dues has become chronic. Out of the total all-India figure of unpaid PF dues of Rs 400 crore, West Bengal's share is over Rs 160 crore.

• Workers, in both industrial and agricultural sectors, are increasingly suffering from pollution and occupational hazard-related diseases. The tendency of the managements and the state has been to avoid proper diagnosis so that they do not have to pay adequate compensation.

The commission has further noted that in the name of rehabilitation of closed factories, the developer-promoter rackets are grabbing prime industrial land for conversion into real estates.

The industrial scenario has obviously been affected by the reign of the World Trade Organisation. Within the purview of the commission, the impact is most pronounced in the pharmaceutical sector. The game of mergers and takeovers begun by the giant multinational players in this sector is threatening the workers' jobs, taking away their bargaining right and imposing unilateral and derogatory service contracts.

It is not only the workers who are being affected. The upward trend in prices of essential medicines caused by the new patent regime is infringing the people's right to medical care. In other words, says Justice Sachar, it is denying them their right to life. •

Mimlesh Dutta/Calcutta

SIKKIM

Starting over

After three years in office, Chamling promises to fight corruption and emphasise development

Having completed three years in office, chief minister Pawan Kumar Chamling is determined to consolidate his position and take Sikkim forward.

The Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF), after its meteoric rise to power, has weathered many a political storm. It was formed in 1994, when it boasted a lone member in the 32-member House: party president Pawan Kumar Chamling. But that year itself, Chamling guided his fledgling party to the top. He led a "revolution" backed by 19 MLAs and annexed the chief minister's chair. Later, the SDF swept the Lok Sabha elections in 1996, and the state's first-ever party-based panchayat polls earlier this year.

Speaking on the occasion of the third anniversary of his government, on 12 December, Chamling promised to make a fresh start in tackling many vital issues. "Criminalisation of politics in the state will not be tolerated," he declared. And his ire wasn't directed against the Opposition alone. He was clearly upset with some of his own partymen as well. He assured the people of Sikkim that all "criminal elements' within the SDF would be "weeded out" and no indiscipline would be tolerated.

Chamling has admitted that several SDF workers are "busy projecting their leaders" and not the "policies and program-

SHYAMAL CHAKRAVARTY

TIME TO ACT: *chief minister Pawan Kumar Chamling*

mes" of the party. He has voiced concern over some SDF party-workers and leaders losing their commitment to the party's ideology, becoming selfish and working for personal gains alone. "This is the biggest problem. In fact, it is a serious setback," laments the SDF chief.

While refuting charges that a large section of the state's bureaucrats were "unsupportive" to his government, the chief minister admits that some are "inefficient". He attributes this shortcoming to their long association with the dictatorial regime of Nar Bahadur Bhandari. Chamling has stated that he does not wish to interfere with the administrative work, but sees himself in the role of policy-maker. "As most of the bureaucrats are 'locals', I have full faith in their sincerity," he says, even while exhorting them to have the "vision" to make Sikkim a "model state" and carry it forward into the next millennium.

While the people of Sikkim do, generally, believe that Chamling has grand plans of transforming the state into a "Naya Sikkim", they are getting restive, with no sign yet of that much-awaited 'change'. And the chief minister's detractors, though lying low, are forever on the lookout to corner Chamling.

Chamling has often said that the main contribution of the SDF has been the restoration of democracy to Sikkim. But now, it is time for development. And for that, Pawan Kumar Chamling must deliver in the new year. •

G. Chettri/Gangtok

BIHAR

Witch-hunting

A conference of dains *in Patna focuses attention on this social evil*

Think of *'dains'* (witches) and you invariably think of evil-looking, blood-thirsty women. But the so-called *'dains'* who assembled at Patna recently, looked completely harmless and helpless. Having been labelled 'witches' by their own people, ostracised, and persecuted, these women were bound together by the commonality of their misfortune.

OSAMA

PERSECUTED: *Rupi Devi*

Twenty six women, young and old, had gathered in Patna under the banner of 'DAIN Atrocities and Measures to Prevent the Same', a forum convened by the Free Legal Aid Committee (FLAC), a Jamshedpur-based NGO. According to FLAC chairman Prem Chand, these women had been brought to the state capital to highlight the social evil.

Among the women was 45-year-old Rupi Devi, a resident of Beltand village in west Singhbhum. Some two years ago, her nephew, Buddu Manjhi, branded her a *dain* after his three-month-old child fell ill. Buddu accused Rupi Devi of "casting an evil spell on the child". *"Humko badnaam kiya ..aur bahut mara bhi* (I was humiliated...and beaten up)," she told SUNDAY.

OSAMA

THE ACCUSED: *some* dains *in Patna*

Sumitra Devi, a widow, was 'identified' as a *dain* in 1992 after an infant died in her village. The allegation was raised by Mahesh Matho, who had, allegedly, been casting a *"buri nazar"* on the widow. The enraged villagers then decided to "punish" Sumitra. They shaved off her head, blackened her face with soot and oil, and paraded her semi-naked through seven villages. *"Humko to zinda jalane ja raha tha...*(They were about to burn me alive...)," recounted Sumitra. She was saved when her son arrived with the police.

"All this was done just to snatch about four cottahs of land that was in my possession," Sumitra told SUNDAY. "Earlier, these people asked for money but I refused. This angered them all the more and so they did this."

Chutni Mahtain, a resident of Mahtaindih village in west Singhbhum, has a similar tale of woe to narrate. Trouble for this 35-year-old woman began in September '95 after Nepi, a young girl in her neighbourhood, fell ill. Chutni had had a quarrel with Nepi a few days before that. When, largely due to the neglect of her family members, the young girl's condition deteriorated, the *ojhas* were called in. The villagers decided that the expenses for the 'puja' would be borne by Chutni, otherwise she would be turned out of the village.

According to Chutni, before the ceremony, the four witch-doctors forced Nepi to say that Chutni was responsible for her illness. *"Chutni humko kha rahi hai, usi ko bulao nahin to hum mar jayenge* (Chutni is eating me, call her, otherwise I will die)," Nepi told the villagers.

Chutni was then dragged by her hair and brought to the spot. Her hair was chopped off and she was forced to eat human excreta to rid her of the "evil spirits" that possessed her. After being thoroughly humiliated, she was driven out of the village. She now lives with her brothers, and awaits the court verdict of a case lodged by her. "I was targeted just to settle scores for the fight I had with Nepi," a tearful Chutni told SUNDAY.

Chando Vadiya's tale is even more gruesome. This physically-handicapped girl of Pariya village in Chaibasa district is the lone survivor of a massacre which claimed the lives of her entire family: her parents and five siblings. This had occurred on 5 April, 1995, after an *ojha* declared that her mother was a *dain*. While a land dispute was the root of the problem, the immediate cause of the carnage was the death of two children in the village, allegedly under the influence of the *dain*.

The villagers then rounded up the Vadiya family on the banks of Vijaya river. While seven members were killed, Chando was gang-raped till she fell unconscious. The assailants left her for dead. She escaped to another village after regaining consciousness. All alone in this world, Chando was rehabilitated by the then deputy commissioner, Chaibasa, Amit Khare (credited with unearthing the fodder scam), who got her the job of a cook in the Women's College Hostel at Chaibasa.

Most of the other *'dains'* who had come to Patna — like Karuna Devi, Vaishali Kumbhkar, Khairun Bibi — had similar horror stories to narrate. Take septuagenarian Khatuna, a vegetable-seller hailing from Jam Baida village in Purulia. Starvation forced her to migrate to Kapali village in west Singbhum district. Suddenly, a neighbour accused Khatuna of being a 'witch' after his baby girl developed a high fever. "I had to leave the village and today, I am not allowed to sell vegetables. For no fault of mine, my family is suffering. We are starving," complains Khatuna.

TALE OF WOE: *Sumitra Devi*

Alarmed by all these incidents, the Chaibasa district administration, led by Amit Khare, had launched a campaign against this superstitious practice. The campaign, named 'Andh Vishwas Nivaran Abhiyan (Anti-Superstition Campaign)' was targeted at both tribals and non-tribals.

But now, it's time for a sustained state-wide campaign against such witch-hunting, feels FLAC chairman Prem Chand. The state government and other voluntary organisations must work together to help create awareness against this social problem and stop the persecution of innocent women. •

Naved Zahir/Patna

TELEVISION

SHUBHRA GUPTA

Brave new world

Indian television has come a long, long way

All around the year, I've had people complaining (and I'm sure you've had your share of no-sayers) that there is Nothing To Watch. That there is so much TV happening, they can't really settle on anything. That more, in the case of Indian television, is certainly less.

THE RIGHT CHOICE: *a progamme on Discovery*

It sets you thinking. Pre-1992, when Doordarshan was the only channel available, it was on everyone's hate-list. But, and this is the thing, it got watched despite its constant current PM-*darshans*, *sarkari*-slots, and *krishi-darshans*.

Then, as the number of channels exploded with mind-boggling speed, the number of carpers shot up exponentially. What is this junk we're expected to watch, they said. These American soaps are five years behind time (this was the section which travelled to the US all the time).

Meanwhile, the Rest of Us had a ball. American soaps quickly morphed into local bubble-baths, and now they're way ahead of their *firang* counterparts in every respect. We've got our versions of the Ramp Stamp, and our versions of celeb shows.

Some of the recently-begun travel shows, especially on Sony and STAR are immensely enjoyable. There are cookery shows all over the place; you may quibble about the provenance of the recipe, but you can't help smiling at the enthusiasm of the host.

The quality of the chat on our shows isn't quite Oprah standard yet, but the alacrity with which Indians have adapted to the let-it-all-hang-out syndrome is amazing. And the best of the fiction compares with the best anywhere. Plus, if you do not want any part of this spectrum, there is always the BBC, CNN, and even better, Discovery.

All this in five years — from one channel to 40, from rigid state control to real freedom of the waves, from very little to plenty — is a great achievement. Yes, we've got junk. So does TV all over the world. But we've got worthwhile things too.

Yes, we need better television. But we're miles ahead of where we were in '92. And who's to say we're not moving forward? On that happy note, into the New Year. •

SUNDAY WEEK

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 28 DECEMBER, 1997

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

Enjoy reaping a just reward for services rendered. Concentrate efforts on a good cause and put your heart into the job at hand. Take a firm decision to mind your diet. A job can be yours for the asking. Dealing with foreign currencies is starred, so you stand to make substantial gains.

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

A contract may be hard to settle. Just be patient. If you are hard up financially and cannot afford amusement as planned there is room for a change. A romantic appointment can be missed because you have the wrong time or place. You could go Dutch if funds are low — provided your partner agrees

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

No matter what the incentive, extra work will not be welcomed as you will have better things to do with your time. There can be illness around you somewhere and you may be called upon to help out. Change your planned schedule willingly, or you could be in the doghouse.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

Dates and venues may be altered. It'll be difficult to keep any secrets. Those worth keeping are quite safe, but you may not be too honest about them. Work done at home will be of good use. You'll be glad to take it easy as your mind is on other things.

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

Leisure hours are spasmodic. Having to depend on someone to release the purse-strings can make you get uptight and unable to have a good time. Do your best to make someone happy and don't get upset by their sense of humour which may baffle you at times. Just go along with the mood.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

Employees are on the ball and should be encouraged. Take on new staff if you are doing well and making good profits. Last-minute schedules can be met if you try to. You could be on to a good thing: don't let up now or you could lose out.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

You may be feeling smug about the fact that you are getting somewhere in a discreet and quiet way. Do a good turn for someone you love and be glad to accept thanks. Give and take is all-important. You cannot have one without the other, so don't push your luck. Things are likely to get sorted out.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

An interest in bric-a-brac or antiques can be satisfied. Techniques may seem to be getting outdated. Revise what you have learned to date. New blood may be introduced into the family. Official sanction that you were hoping for may be refused.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

Outspoken people can upset you. On the other hand, you may have to win a verbal argument to prove yourself. Apply your mind to a chosen task and don't leave till you have solved the puzzle. Sensitive home conditions may have to be tackled. Be patient and don't create any difficulties yourself.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

Don't get carried away. You are bound get bogged down and can lose your perspective. A love affair can go off the rails because one of you is getting over-emotional. There may be a birth in the family. Costs can soar. Get your priorities right or you can be spending a lot in return for very little.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

Keep an eye on children. They may be talking about things they don't understand, or giving away information. An older person come in the way of a money-making scheme. You may not be doing your best and can feel depressed. Don't underrate yourself as your chances you are good as the next, if not better.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

Someone may be making decisions for you. That is fine if you need a substitute; but you will resent anyone overplaying the act. Something in your private life has meaning and will fare well in the future. Loose ends will have to be tied up. •

Plain-speak

The award given to the Ambani brothers — Mukesh and Anil — recently saw a huge turnout of politicians, indicating that an election was not far off.

Politicians of all hues and colours were there applauding away at the success of a business family. From the Congress there was Jitendra Prasada, Surinder Singla, Murli Deora and others; Murli Manohar Joshi of the BJP was present, resplendent in his colourful *angavastra*; and so were a host of other minor politicians hovering around the senior Ambani, murmuring "Dhirubhaiji..."

Talking to the leaders present, Dhirubhai outlined his project. "I don't need crutches like joint ventures. If I want technology, I can buy it. If I want capital, I can raise it. If I want machinery, I can procure it from anywhere in the world. I don't need foreign help," said Ambani forthrightly.

"But Indian politicians need your help," murmured a bureaucrat from the back.

HEARD IN NEW DELHI

These days, the most popular song on *Chitrahaar* is: '*Gill hai ki manta nahin*'.

AN OFFICIAL FROM THE INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING MINISTRY ABOUT PRASAR BHARATI SECRETARY, S S GILL

Dhirubhai Ambani: means business

Tough turf

The BJP has almost decided to field Sanjay Singh from Amethi. But Singh is a little hesitant because of his fear of two ladies: Sonia Gandhi, for obvious reasons, and his estranged wife, Garima Singh.

Although there is some kind of pact between him and his wife, that he will not try to evict her from the family house if she keeps her mouth shut, there are many working on Garima Singh.

The Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) elements, who are very close to V.P. Singh (who is Garima's uncle) are telling her that she must speak up to prevent elements like Sanjay Singh from entering Parliament.

If Garima Singh does jump into the fray, Sanjay Singh will be deeply embarrassed on his homeground. It has to be seen how he will overcome this problem.

Ticket to ride

Former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao is caught in a bind. He desperately wants to fight the Lok Sabha election; but no one has asked him anything about a ticket so far.

Rao has almost decided to contest from Behrampur in Orissa. But repeated requests to the chief minister, J.B. Patnaik, have yielded nothing. It is not that Patnaik doesn't want him to contest the seat — quite the contrary. But having just established relationship with Sitaram Kesri, Patnaik does not want to queer it by making a pitch for a ticket for P.V. Narasimha Rao.

Narasimha Rao: will he miss the bus?

As a result, Rao is now worried that if J.B. Patnaik does not speak, the ticket might be given to someone else. The man who has distributed thousands of party tickets in his lifetime is now [illegible] he'll manage to [illegible]

CHECK-LIST

The Bharatiya Janata Party's Cabinet

- **Prime Minister:** Atal Behari Vajpayee has already been declared Prime Minister by the party. Not a decision which has everyone's approval, but now they can take it, or they'll have to dump it.
- **Defence minister:** Jaswant Singh, with his army background, is the obvious choice. But the BJP specialises in denying to its members what they want most.
- **Finance minister:** Yashwant Sinha is too junior in the hierarchy. Otherwise, he would have been the right man for the job, having held it once before. More to the point, he would have taken a rational note of the *swadeshi* campaign.
- **Home minister:** As a 13-day home minister, Murli Manohar Joshi was successful. But in the long term, maybe it is Pramod Mahajan who should have the job.
- **Human resources development:** With his scholastic interests, maybe this is the job Murli Manohar Joshi is best suited for.
- **Information and broadcasting:** Given that the Prasar Bharati set up is now in place, the minister won't have so much to do. So the job will probably go to an ally.
- **Civil aviation:** If the BJP can appoint Sunder Singh Bhandari to this job, it will be a coup — not only will it depoliticise and deglamourise the portfolio, but he is bound to inject some discipline into the sector.

Letter bombs

What Sitaram Kesri had feared has happened. Arjun Singh has started writing letters to him.

A long time ago, at a meeting of the Congress Working Committee (CWC), Sitaram Kesri had issued a warning to his colleagues.

"I have two telephones. My house is not very far from AICC. Kindly do not write letters to me. This mode of communication is not acceptable. You can ring me up and talk to me whenever you like, at all hours of the night and day...," he told a CWC member.

And Arjun Singh wrote him a letter after that. He has

Arjun Singh: shooting missiles

written two or three since. And Kesri is furious that even after his warning, Singh has had the temerity to write to him on the Tamil Nadu fiasco.

Kesri is now wondering how to cure the headache. Arjun Singh had broken his hand recently. Congress(I) workers say, only in jest of course, that Sitaram Kesri had something to do with this. However, this much is clear: If Arjun Singh does not stop writing letters forthwith, Kesri is going to have to do something about it.

HEARD IN NEW DELHI

Our ministers are very happy — we have someone Kaw-towing to them all the time.

A BUREAUCRAT IN THE MINISTRY OF CIVIL AVIATION

The Brahmin conspiracy

This is not the only reason for Kesri's ire. He suddenly gets the feeling that he's being singled out for persecution because he's from a backward class — because all those who've ganged up against him are Brahmins.

There's Jagannath Mishra, who hasn't spared him. There's Mamata Banerjee, who reacting to Kesri's filial feelings for her, said on record that she will never accept a bandicoot as a father. There's Mani Shankar Aiyar, who thinks Kesri is 'uneducated, illiterate buffoon'. "And now there's N. Bhaskara Rao," moaned Kesri to a colleague.

It was gently pointed out to him that N. Bhaskara Rao (NBR) is a Kamma from Andhra Pradesh, not a Brahmin. He wouldn't believe this, because Narasimha Rao is a Brahmin. "If he's a Brahmin, NBR must be a Brahmin as well," he said, apropos nothing.

The bottomline is, there is a conspiracy of Brahmins against him. And this is an open invitation to other Brahmins to sign up.

Guess who's coming to dinner?

Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral lost an opportunity to take the relationship betwen the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan forward, when his office did not grant an appointment to the son of Pak Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Nawaz Sharif's son was in India in connection with family business, and from his room at Delhi's Hyatt

Inder Gujral: poor diplomacy

Regency, called PMO to see Gujral. It was a gesture of courtesy and would have made for good public relations.

But for some reason — political or administrative, we don't know — PMO forgot about the call and didn't bother to return it. He waited in India for two days and has since returned, a little disappointed.

Nawaz Sharif would never have done this to the son of a visiting Prime Minister. Why can't India be more civilised — even while handing out snubs. •

CHECK-LIST

Political disasters of 1997

■ H.D. Deve Gowda government falls: The Congress dethroned H.D. Deve Gowda from the prime ministership, because Sitaram Kesri was suspicious of Deve Gowda's antecedents. This set the precedent for instability at the Centre which was to dog the country for the whole year.

■ Sitaram Kesri becomes Congress president: The ratification of his election became a fact this year, leading to upheavals in the party. Although Kesri brought Arjun Singh, Madhavrao Scindia and others back into the party, at the end of the year, he was wishing he had kept some of them out — like Arjun Singh.

■ Bharatiya Janata Party encourages defections: The BJP split the Congress(I) and the BSP in UP offering the lure of power and money to MLAs. This created a stir among social forces in Uttar Pradesh. If the BJP is the party with the largest number of seats in UP, does this mean an endorsement for the politics of money and power?

■ Inder Kumar Gujral government falls: A decent man fell a prey to administrative inefficiency. I.K. Gujral held a coalition together and put up with personal attacks on him by the party. But the Jain Commission report and the Congress' resolve to kill itself destroyed an experiment.

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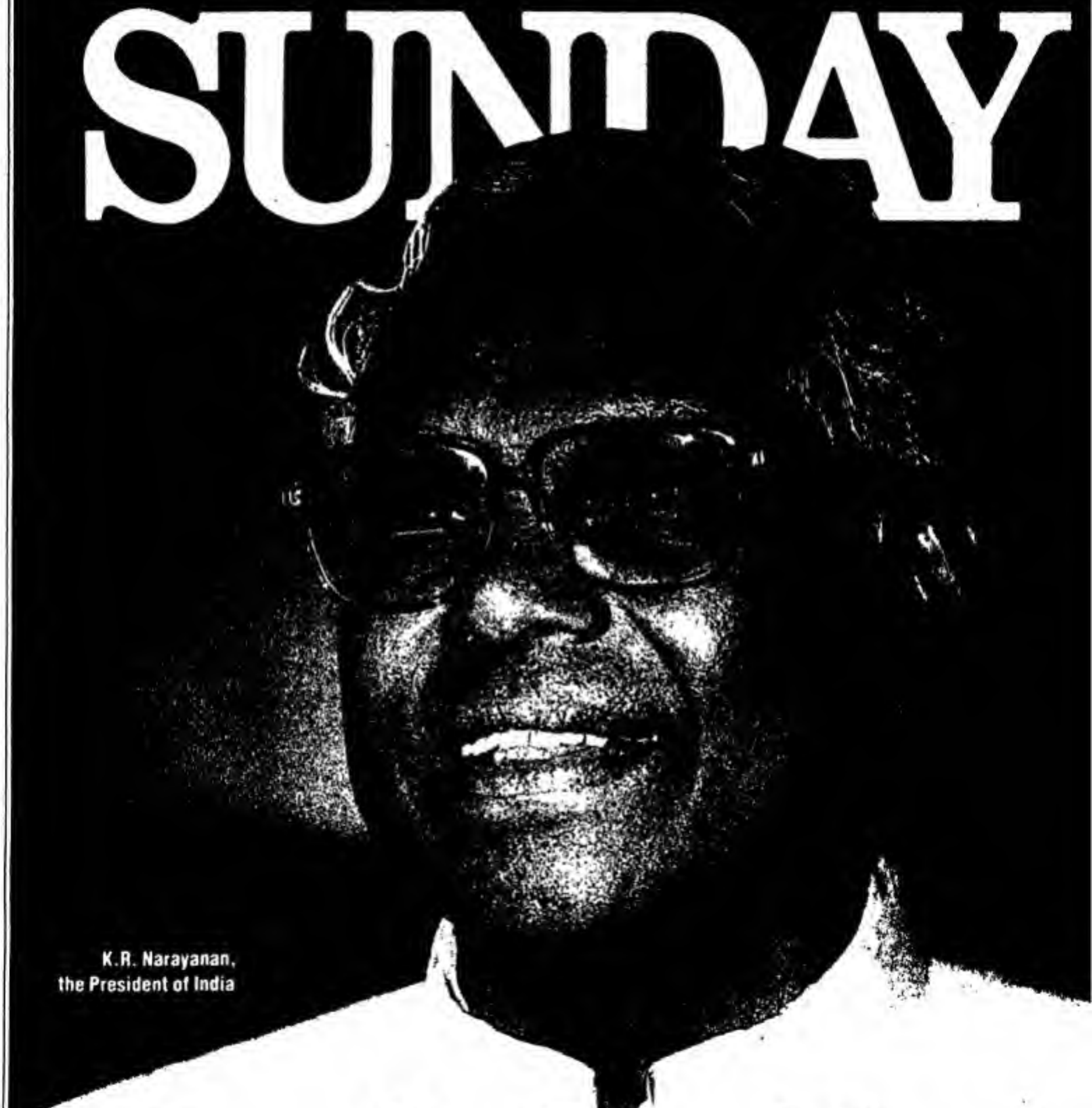
1997: THE YEAR THAT WAS

SUNDAY



K.R. Narayanan,
the President of India

MAN OF THE YEAR 1997

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The year that was

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Oh! for an issue

Jaded political parties trying to wake up a lazy electronic media seem to be the order of the day (*An issue-less election*, 21—27 December).

Indeed, political parties are at their wit's end groping for issues likely to charge up the electoral atmosphere. It's worrisome for them that the electorate remains glum and listless. It is sad but not without meaning that it is happening in the world's largest democracy — a country where once the elections used to whip up such fever and frenzy that even the remotest corners of the naton were not left out.

But with Prime Ministers playing musical chairs and their trusted leaders turning coats at the drop of a hat, the Indian electorate has learnt their lesson the hard way.

The longer they remember their lessons, the better for the country.

Trisha Roy, Calcutta (West Bengal)

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The country has tried the Congress with routine regularity till the late seventies. What has followed is a series of *aya Ram gaya Ram* governments — patchwork outfits born out of expediency and the need to survive.

This election should therefore address the issue of whether India can be ruled by coalition governments or is it inevitable that we vote in concert and make sure that a single party is elected with a comfortable majority and thus is in a position to deliver.

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Atal Behari Vajpayee: PM-in-waiting?

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It's equally certain that the BJP will get the highest number of parliamentary seats and form a stable government with help from its allies. The last few experiments with so-called secular parties forming governments of convenience have generated enough disgust across the country. It will therefore be small wonder if people choose the BJP and give it an unequivocal mandate and hope for a change.

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Indian democracy has never touched such despicable depths. The Congress is interested only in power, the UF will never provide a stable government, and that leaves no effective party or grouping fit to rule.

The Constitution, therefore, requires an urgent amendment to ensure that President's rule is invoked if any government fails to complete its five-year term.

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Let there be light

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May his tribe increase. At least that should be the prayer of every patriotic Indian. His brainchild Agni deserves special mention in this con text. With a range of some 2500 kilometers, it is an effective deterrent to Sino-Pak missile technology cooperation. Doubtless, the government should initiate serial production of Agni and induct the same into the army. That will be the best tribute to one of the greatest scientists of all times.

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Leave the law alone

This refers to the story, *Sex as service* (23 —29 November). There is no doubt that the plight of prostitutes in India is pitiable. It is absolutely silly, at the same time, to plead on their behalf and seek legalisation of their trade.

Whatever may explain the rush to join the trade, it would be sheer folly to promote this evil. The Prevention of Immoral Traffic Act has been a containing arm of the law. To scrap it would be suicidal.

Unionising and politicising the sex workers issue will be patently disastrous. Why shouldn't there be decent and viable ways for prostitutes to earn their living?

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Scam age

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The CAG, supposed to work as an autonomous body with constitutional sanction, is now a helpless witness to endemic cases of fraud and embezzlement. Financial irregularities often suffered and abetted by state governments come to light only when the sums involved assume astronomical proportions.

It's time, instead of rhetoric and sermons, the Centre thought of concrete structural changes to arrest the rampant theft of public funds. Nothing short of a thorough overhaul of the old laws and strict enforcement of accountability will contain the cult of scams.

Gautam Saha, Bihpuria, (Assam)

SEPARATED AT BIRTH?

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Actress

Sagarika Soni
T.V. actress

Contributed by Naseem Pasha, Bangalore (Karnataka)

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Gautam Saha, Bihpuria, (Assam)

MILESTONES

FORMED: by former Congress leader from Bihar Jagannath Mishra, a new political party called the Bihar Jan Congress, on 24 December.

DIED: renowned educationist and industrialist M.S. Rumaiah, on 25 December, in Bangalore. He was 75. He had set up a string of educational institutions.

EXPELLED: Mamata Banerjee, from the primary membership of

the Congress party for six years, on 22 December

APPOINTED: Rajeev Bakshi, as managing director designate of Cadbury India Ltd. He took charge on 1 January, 1998.

DISSOLVED: the Himachal Pradesh Assembly, on 24 December, following recommendation from the council of ministers, to pave the way for simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha.

DIED: Tridib Choudhury, all-India leader of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), on 21 December, in New Delhi, after prolonged illness.

SIGHT & SOUND

KESHAV THE HINDU

■ We cannot let them down

JYOTI BASU, *West Bengal chief minister, pointing out that secular and regional parties are urging the CPI(M) to head a coalition at the Centre*

■ This is my reward for not hobnobbing with the CPI(M).

MAMATA BANERJEE, *Trinamool Congress leader, after being expelled from the Congress party*

■ He is a very senior leader. Let us not talk about him at this stage of electioneering.

SITARAM KESRI, *Congress president, on whether P.V. Narasimha Rao will be given a Congress ticket*

■ For 40 years, we played the game by the rules. But our political rivals never observed the rules and played foul. So, the game has now to be played by the rules our opponents follow.

ATAL BEHARI VAJPAYEE, *BJP leader, at the end of his party's three-day national executive in Bhubaneswar*

■ The feudal forces, in a well-planned conspiracy, perpetrated the worst-ever massacre with the ill-intention that the Prime Minister would rush to the carnage site and recommend imposition of President's rule.

LALOO PRASAD YADAV, *former CM of Bihar, alleging a conspiracy to topple the RJD-led state government*

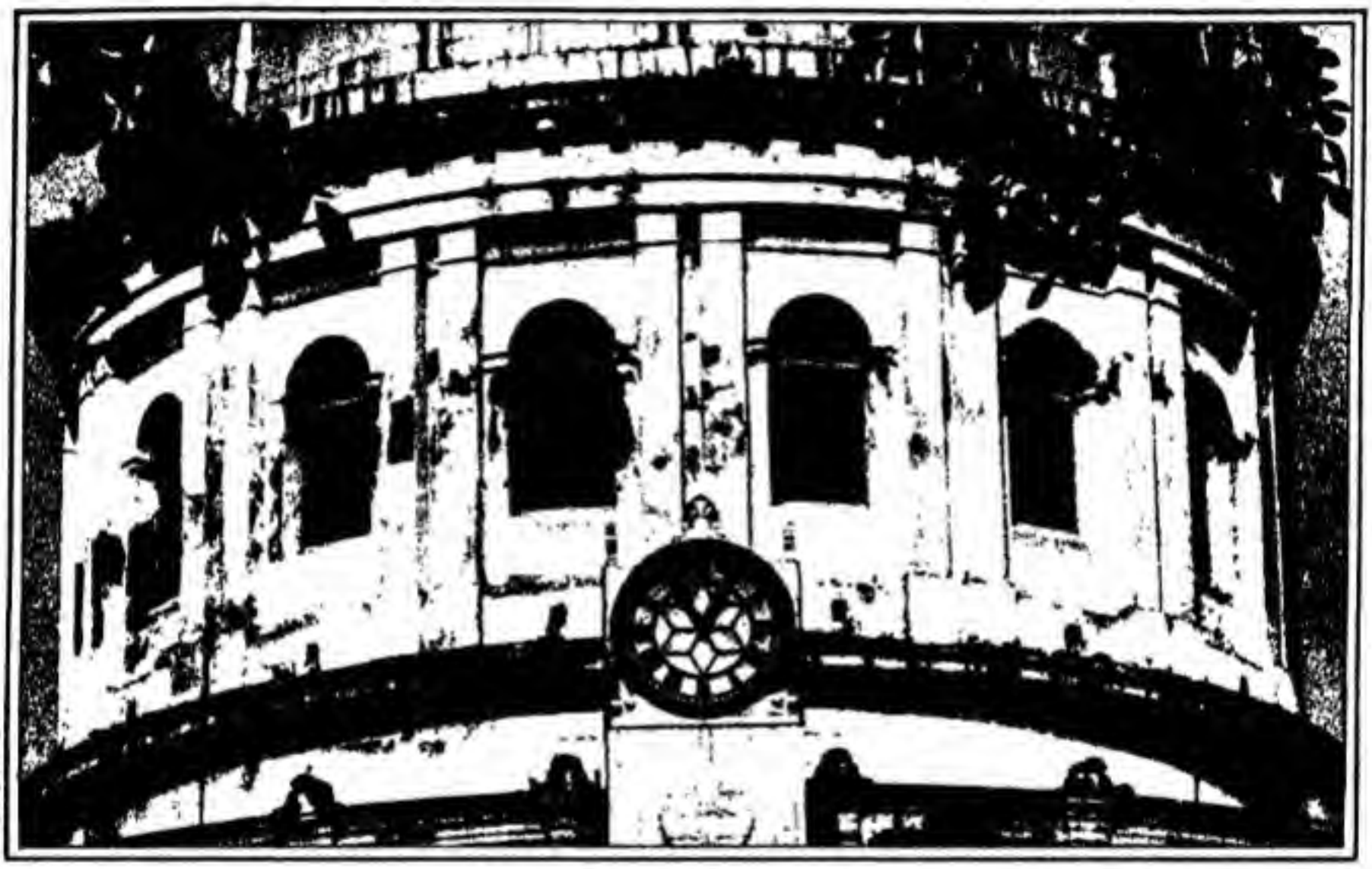
■ You can't ignore lust. I'm attracted to good-looking men all the time...but I'll never damage something strong just for a fling or casual affair.

TWINKLE KHANNA, *film actress*

SEEN

CHIMES OF TIME

The 100-year-old clock atop India's oldest GPO ticks again



PRADIP SANYAL

TOLLING BENEDICTION: *the clock*

On midnight, 24 December, Calcutta stirred to a long-unfamiliar sound: the tolling of a bell. It was more sight than sound. This was no cathedral gong ululating into the darkness, but the 100-year-old tower clock atop GPO building that suddenly started chiming on Christmas eve. But why would it, all of a sudden, that too in strange, antinomian Calcutta?

Maybe, that's why — as a reminder. Because, somehow we have lost our past, done away with memories of a city that was once the capital of British India and the centre of our nascent struggle for freedom. Just that, it was coincidental.

But then, conclusions can be blurring, and finding coincidences can, at best, be tangential. Maybe, there aren't any conclusions to be drawn. But all the same, it was Christmas eve, the 1997th Christmas. After years, the old clock was ticking again, marking time to 2000 A.D., the year of the Antichrist. Could the chimes be a reminder of that Nostradamun prophesy?

Could be, but let's not talk of that. Let's just talk about the bell.

It's made of gun metal. The tower clock and the bell were bought for Rs 7,000 in 1897 from the makers of Big Ben in London.

But why did it fall silent? And which year was it? The GPO doesn't know, and there *are* no records. Funny, isn't it? Come to think of it, it's an artefact that needed to be preserved. But that's how it is. It's our appalling sense of history. We forget that the 220-foot GPO, west of Dalhousie Square in the heart of the city, is the oldest Indian GPO. And there aren't many who have heard of Walter B. Granville, the designer of this grand Corinthian structure built about 130 years back.

That's a long, long time. Much has changed since: the city, the people...like the peeling plaster on the walls of the GPO. The clanging bell has made history chime again, thanks to a major watch manufacturing firm that repaired the sleeping clock. These are mere details. Nothing more. What is sad is that most of us didn't even know of it, that once it oscillated to its own rhythmic beats.

Any hidden portents? Maybe. Maybe not. Yet the mind-clock ticks. There must be a symbolic significance. Winter is cold, but winter brought forth Jesus. And the bell chimed on Christmas eve. •

Ananda Kamal Sen/Calcutta

Any symbolic significance? Winter is cold, but winter brought forth Jesus. And the bell chimed on Christmas eve

'We have no intention of p

Kalyan Singh on the BJP's election strategy

INTERVIEWED BY SHARAT PRADHAN/LUCKNOW

"Log Musalmano ko gumrah kar rahen hain, hum unhe humrah karna chahte hain (While others have been misguiding Muslims, we want them to come with us)" Astonishingly, this comes from none other than the Bharatiya Janata Party's national vice-president and Uttar Pradesh chief minister Kalyan Singh, whose party has traditionally kept Muslims at arm's length.

The man who masterminded the coups in the Congress and the Bahujan Samaj Party and inducted every defector to form his giant 93-member Cabinet now has a bigger task before him — to ensure a big win for the party at the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections from UP, that could change the political destiny of the nation.

Singh, pursuing a strong Hindutva line and facing trial as the key accused in the Babri Masjid demolition conspiracy, makes no bones about his party's plans to woo Muslims. Excerpts from an interview:

SUNDAY: What will be your criterion for the selection of Muslim candidates?

Kalyan Singh: The candidate must have the potential to win. Winnability will be the most important criterion in the selection of party nominees and the same will apply to Muslim candidates too. Let me assure you if one has the potential to win a seat, he will not be sidelined simply because he happens to be a Muslim.

Q: How does your party hope to pacify the Muslims, particularly in the wake of the Babri Masjid demolition in December 1992, when you headed the BJP government in UP?

A: Well, barring a few misguided Muslims the larger section is aware that no mosque was demolished in Ayodhya. It was a structure where no *namaz* had been offered since 1935.

Muslims also know that Hindus had been offering prayers before the deity of infant Lord Ram inside that structure for decades, and they are also convinced that the temple will continue to remain there for all times to come.

Q: What is your selling point to attract Muslim votes, particularly, when the BJP is known as a communal party?

A: The larger section of Muslims do realise that BJP regimes have always ensured riot-free environment everywhere. You could see our track record. Never has there been any riot during the course of BJP rule, whether in Uttar Pradesh or in any other state.

Q: Do you think you could woo the Shias — who are favourably inclined towards the BJP's prime ministerial nominee, Atal Behari Vajpayee — by lifting the 20-year-old ban on the *azadaari* procession in Lucknow?

A: Well, a good chunk of Muslims including Shias supported the candidature of Atalji even at the last elections, because they realise that today's economic prosperity among Muslims is attributable to the opening of doors for employment in Gulf countries, that was Atalji's gift to Muslims when he was the external affairs minister in 1977.

As regards the *azadaari* procession, I am keen on resolving the long-pending issue that has led to violent protests and bloody Shia-Sunni riots, the most recent of these being witnessed barely six months back. I will personally have an across-the-table talk with representatives of both sects and I am sure we will be able to thrash out a solution.

Q: Then what is going to happen to the Ayodhya issue which you were expected to play up in view of the elections?

A: We have no intention of playing the Ayodhya card at all in the coming elections. But I would not be surprised if our opponents and critics will make the issue alive, though I am sure that will go only to BJP's benefit.

Q: Don't you seem to be giving the impression that your party has deviated sharply from its traditional Hindutva line?

A: BJP has certainly not left its Hindutva line, but the fact of the matter is that there are other even more vital issues that cannot be ignored. But let it not be misconstrued that we are going to compromise on our principle of ensuring justice to all and appeasement of none.

Q: So you have realised that without a broader approach it may not be possible for the BJP to establish its credentials as a party that could rule the nation.

A: For years canards have been spread about us that we are communal; we are an upper-caste party. However, if you go by figures, you will find that we have many more Dalit MPs as well as MLAs than any other political party.

I fail to understand why the media often led to believe that the entire Dalit community was represented by BSP, or that all OBCs were rallying behind Mulayam Singh Yadav. That is a misnomer.

Q: Despite the continued enstrangement between your two main rivals — the BSP and the SP — an eleventh-hour rapprochement is still not ruled out. How would your party be placed in that situation?

A: First of all, such a possibility is too remote, specially because of the mutual animosity that runs down the rank and file of both parties. Even if the leaders of the two parties agreed to come together the hard feelings in their respective cadres would not be easy to overcome.

Yet, if there was a patch-up it will not affect our pros-

laying the Ayodhya card'

DHEERAJ DHAWAN

pects of taking our tally well over that of 52 in the recently dissolved Parliament (out of the state's 85). Though of course I do not deny that in such an event there could be a fall in the winning margin of BJP nominees; that's all.

Q: But even as they were divided, each of them polled about 20 per cent votes taking their combined tally to 40 per cent, as against the BJP's 32 per cent in the last elections in UP.

A: Aren't you aware that in terms of seats, their individual tally did not go beyond 22 — 16 SP and 6 BSP? So you see, even if they were to come under a common banner, it would really not make any difference to our strength in terms of seats.

Q: And what if Sonia Gandhi eventually decides to take the plunge in a last-ditch effort to save the Congress from doom?

A: Soniaji is well aware of the ways of her partymen. She has had a taste of the strifes that she attempted to sort out in West Bengal. So, I am sure she will be prudent enough to keep off politics. But even if she chooses to take a plunge, I am sure she does not have the potential to rock BJP's boat that is all set for a smooth sail through the rough seas ahead.

"Congress is irrelevant, JD and Left parties are dead, while BSP's sun is setting. Whatever little force remains for us to reckon with is SP. And you'll see how BJP gives them a run for their money"

Congress is irrelevant, JD and Left parties are dead, while BSP's sun is setting. And whatever little force remains for us to reckon with is SP — and you'll see how BJP gives them a run for their money.

Q: How sure are you of your party getting an absolute majority?

A: BJP and its allies will get the desired majority to form the next government at the Centre. You see, people are sick of instability and they are conscious that BJP alone can provide them a stable government that in turn could combat corruption and take the nation out of the vicissitudes it has gone through over the recent past. •

INDER MALHOTRA

Of prime importance

Indo-Chinese relations desperately need a shot in the arm

Who could have thought, even a few years ago, that top leaders of this country and China will sit together one day to discuss, among other things, rampant corruption in the two Asian giants which are also the world's most and second-most populous nations? And, yet, this is precisely what happened during the recent visit to New Delhi of Wei Jianxing who is the sixth ranking member of the seven-man standing committee of the all-powerful Chinese Politburo.

One must hasten to add, however, that corruption was only one of the subjects which figured in the wide-ranging discussions with Inder Kumar Gujral, home minister Indrajit Gupta (with the chief vigilance commissioner and senior officials of the CBI in attendance) and others.

Wei is a new addition to the politburo's standing committee and, from all accounts, is an up-and-coming man in the Chinese hierarchy. This lends some importance to the fact that he is the first high-level Chinese leader to come to India after the Chinese President, Jiang Zemin, and, indeed, the only senior leader from either side, in 1997, to carry forward the process of high-level contacts between India and China. He undertook the journey at a time when a caretaker government is in office in New Delhi, indicating that China's relationship with this country is not influenced by the ebb and flow of Indian politics.

Alternatively, China, which keeps very close tabs on developments here, must have concluded that, despite frequent changes of government, the underlying structure of the Indian system remains stable. Moreover, it merits notice that in the recent past, top Chinese leaders have always combined a visit to this country with that to Pakistan. Jiang Zemin went to Islamabad from New Delhi and Qiao Shi (now out of the politburo but still chairman of the National People's Congress) had reversed the process. Wei came only to India. To be sure, these are symbolic gestures but their importance is undoubted.

To move to the substance of the talks, primarily aimed at rapport-building, it must be reported that manifest cordiality of the occasion was not at the cost of candour. Gujral took up all matters of Indian concern which include the extremely slow pace of implementing the 1993 and 1996 agreements to resolve the boundary issue. There was agreement that the pace should be enhanced.

It is no secret to Beijing that this country is gravely concerned about China's crucial help to Pakistan's nuclear and missile programmes. The visiting Chinese dignitary, unsurprisingly, repeated the standard Beijing line that no such assistance was being given. As it happened, however, just when these views were being exchanged, reports from Washington revealed that, with China's ample contribution, Pakistan had developed a long-range ballistic missile, Ghauri, the missile's name being a riposte of sorts to Prithvi, India's short-range missile.

Since Tibet is a matter of great sensitivity to China, it was remarkable that Wei expressed appreciation of India's "consistent policy" on the Tibet region of China.

Departing from the Chinese position that the five principles of peaceful coexistence emanated from Beijing, Wei said that these principles — "Panch Sheel, as you call them" — were authored jointly by Zhou Kalei and Jawaharlal Nehru.

Trade between India and China is expected to rise to 1.8 billion dollars this year. If the 2.6 billion dollar worth of trade with Hong Kong is added, the India-China trade becomes worth 4.4 billion dollars, close to the target of 5 billion dollars, fixed by Jiang Zemin, for the year 2000. Given the huge populations of the two countries, the trade is, in fact, woefully paltry.

In short, while India-China relations have improved satisfactorily, they are progressing excruciatingly slowly, indeed glacially. To impart much greater stimulus to them must be a major task of the government to be formed after 15 March, 1998. •

I.K. Gujral (above) took up all matters of Indian concern with Wei Jianxing, the sixth ranking member of the seven-man standing committee of the all-powerful Chinese Politburo, during the latter's recent visit to New Delhi

The Bihari brotherhood

Laloo Prasad Yadav reaches out to his fellowmen in Calcutta

"*Bihar ka badshah aaj Bengal jeetne aya hai* (The ruler of Bihar has come to conquer Bengal today)," was the muted whisper from an awestruck admirer gaping at his hero sitting imperiously on a makeshift podium at Calcutta's Shahid Minar. While Laloo Prasad Yadav didn't really pull off a CSC (came, saw, conquered) act, he did bowl over his Bihari brethren with a typically *masaledar* mix of relaxed rusticism and brash belligerence.

On 28 December, Laloo flew into Calcutta for a few hours to address a Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) rally. The build-up was typical of a lazy winter afternoon in the West Bengal capital. Those gathered at the site were little interested in what the local RJD leaders had to say. Even the presence of RJD working president Ranjan Yadav and former Union minister Taslimuddin failed to inspire.

All that changed with Laloo's entry. The impassive hundreds were transformed into surging thousands, jostling for a closer view of their *neta*. And the showman didn't let them down. His every move — he posed with a massive lantern (the RJD's election symbol), pulled up a chair and set the mike for himself and settled down for a cosy chat with the crowd — drew loud cheers from his followers.

But for all his playing to the galleries, it was clear that Laloo was a man with a mission. His target audience: "*mere Bihari bhai jo Bengal mein rahke, majoori karke, apna roji-roti kama rahen hain* (my Bihari brothers who are living in Bengal and earning their livelihood through physical labour)."

Yes, there was his pet political diatribe against the BJP ("not a political party but a front for the RSS") and the Gowda-Paswan-Sharad trio ("traitors and opportunists"). But the accent was on sounding a clarion call to non-resident Biharis to back the RJD, and the tongue, often, Bhojpuri. Calling on all "rickshawwallahs, *thelawallahs, sabziwallahs, badaamwallahs, khainiwallahs...*", the boss of Bihar exhorted them to help spread the light of the 'lantern' to all corners of eastern India.

PRADIP SAHA

"I have not taken on the ruling Left Front as I have the highest personal regard for Jyotibabu. But I will not tolerate the persecution of my people in Bengal anymore," warned Laloo

"I have not entered into any confrontation with the ruling Left Front in Bengal as I have the highest personal regard for Jyotibabu," declared Laloo. "But I will not tolerate any *anyay-atyachar* on my people anymore," he warned.

The former Bihar CM accused the Left of straying from its avowed path of social justice and making life difficult for the poor, daily wage-earners in Calcutta. "I know that my poor Bihari brothers who manage to save some money and buy land here are harassed and hounded by CPI(M) cadres. This must stop."

"If you evict hawkers, give them a suitable alternative; if you stop rickshaws, give them tempos; if you change rent laws see that it does not leave the poor labourer feeling insecure..." he admonished the state administration.

The political highlight of the day's Laloospeak was, of course, his word of advice for veteran Marxist chief minister Jyoti Basu. "Jyotibabu should not waste time in a party which is filled with manipulative people like Surjeet and which did not allow him to become PM. He should break away, form another party, and we can then work together...," said Laloo, tongue firmly in cherubic cheek.

But for his Bihari fans, it was Laloo's words of valour that made their day. "My poor Bihari brothers, do not show respect to those who do not respect you. Do not feel insecure as you are away from your homeland. Biharis have as much right over Bengal as Bengalis have over Bihar. As long as I am there, you have nothing to fear," he signed-off.

And as the RJD chief departed to cries of *"Laloo Yadav zindabad"*, several barefoot Biharis leaving the Shahid Minar that winter evening were walking tall. •

Sumit Das Gupta/Calcutta

The great Janpath nod

With Sonia finally willing to campaign, there is euphoria in the Congress. But will she go the whole hog?

The tune was definitely *'aaj mere yaar ki shadi hai'*, but Mohan Band from Karol Bagh (paid for by H K.L. Bhagat) was adding arpeggios frantically to make it sound like something else. The line of Ambassador cars blocked all other traffic. Bouquet after bouquet went in and was swallowed up by the cavernous depths of No.10. Congressmen danced on the road and all that was missing was a few of them standing on their head.

It was Sonia Gandhi's birthday. Carnivaltime for Congressmen who only wanted one thing — to *lao* Sonia and *bachao* the *desh*.

But the Lady neither said yea nor nay.

The agonising wait came to an end 17 days later. On 29 December, Vincent George, secretary at No.10, issued a brief statement. In deference to the wishes of Congressmen, Sonia Gandhi had decided to campaign for the Congress party in the forthcoming general elections. The dates of the campaign would be decided later

Sitaram Kesri was the first to react. "*Mera tension khatam ho gaya hai. Ab Sonia ji party chaluengi. Mein to bahut khush hoon. saat din sey soya nahin hoon. Aaj mein chain sey so-oonga.* (My tension is at an end. Now Sonia Gandhi will run the party. I haven't slept for the past seven days. Tonight I will sleep in peace)," said Kesri to reporters, grinning broadly, betraying his happiness by playing the *tabla* on the tabletop. "I will hold a press conference in a few days and tell you all about it," he added.

For more than a year, Congressmen had been petitioning Rajiv Gandhi's widow to join politics, either by becoming the president of the party or by becoming a member of the Congress Working Committee (CWC). Sonia Gandhi had responded cautiously — by becoming a primary member of the Congress(I) instead, in April this year. She made another cautious move forward by addressing the plenary session of the Congress in Calcutta in August. There she said it was Rajiv Gandhi's dream that the Cogress(I) should get back to the grassroots, a refrain that was taken up by UP PCC chief Jitendra Prasada later.

"My tension is at an end. Now Sonia Gandhi will run the party. I haven't slept for the past seven days. Tonight I will sleep in peace," says Kesri

However, nothing much came of it, as Mani Shankar Aiyar pointed out when he announced his decision to 'dissociate' himself from the Congress. Congressmen kept telling Sonia Gandhi she should play a more active part in politics, but no working committee member pressed a resolution at the CWC demanding that Sonia Gandhi be made member of the highest policy-making body. Fearing that they might be denied nomination, about 40 Congress members left the party, some joining the BJP, because they said Sitaram Kesri's leadership would destroy the Congress. The most raucous demand that Sonia Gandhi intervene was voiced by Mamata Banerjee, who then left the party to form the Trinamool Congress. Still Sonia Gandhi wouldn't say anything.

Finally, she took the decision without being prompted. If only to press home the point that she wouldn't be led by the nose by *anyone*.

Sonia Gandhi's concerns are many.

- The rate at which Congressmen are leaving the party, may shortly leave no Congress at all. The situation has to be arrested.
- Sitaram Kesri is losing his authority in the party. To the extent that many Congressmen who have met Sonia Gandhi have suggested that former finance minister Manmohan Singh projected as Kesri's alterative and leader of the Congress. In the circumstances, it is impetative to prevent a power vacuum in the party.
- It is important also to make sure the Congress holds on, at the very least, to what it already has.

Sonia's friends say requests from party workers asking to see her with entreaties that she step in have inundated 10 Janpath. The refrain is the same: so long it's Sonia Gandhi at the helm, the Congress will live.

It should be music to the ears for Sonia. But the ramifications of stepping in are many. Is Sonia Gandhi going to plunge into politics? No, say her friends. This is just a preliminary exercise, aimed at stemming the exodus from the party. So will she contest from Amethi? Nothing is decided, they say, but she hasn't said yes, and she hasn't said no.

The most raucous demand that Madam intervene was voiced by Mamata Banerjee. Still Sonia Gandhi wouldn't say anything. She took the plunge without prompting, if only to press home the point that she would be led by none

The dilemma is that plunging into active politics means power over the Congress — but also all the problems associated with it: the intrigue, the backbiting, the crowds, the arbitrations...

Where Sonia won't campaign

Calcutta South: Mamata Banerjee gave up her party for Sonia Gandhi; she responded —but it was too little too late. Will Sonia campaign for the official Congress candidate against Mamata?

Barrackpore: Driven out of Tamil Nadu, Mani Shankar Aiyar has taken refuge in a Marxist stronghold in West Bengal. He announced he was 'dissociating' himself from the Congress until Sonia Gandhi took up the leadership. She didn't save him then. Will she help him now?

Calcutta North East: Ajit Panja has been a dedicated Sonia loyalist. He has shown the guts to announce that he wasn't going back to the official Congress despite his respect for Sonia Gandhi. Will she contribute to his losing the election?

While this problems may be put on the backburner for the moment, Sonia Gandhi has a lot on her mind right now. She is likely to campaign only in Karnataka, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh — states where the Congress is poised to do well. She will tour party headquarters in the states beginning from Sriperumbudur and going on to Bhubaneswar where Indira Gandhi started her last election campaign before her assassination. She will send out a pan-Indian appeal, asking voters to vote the Congress because it is the only all-India party.

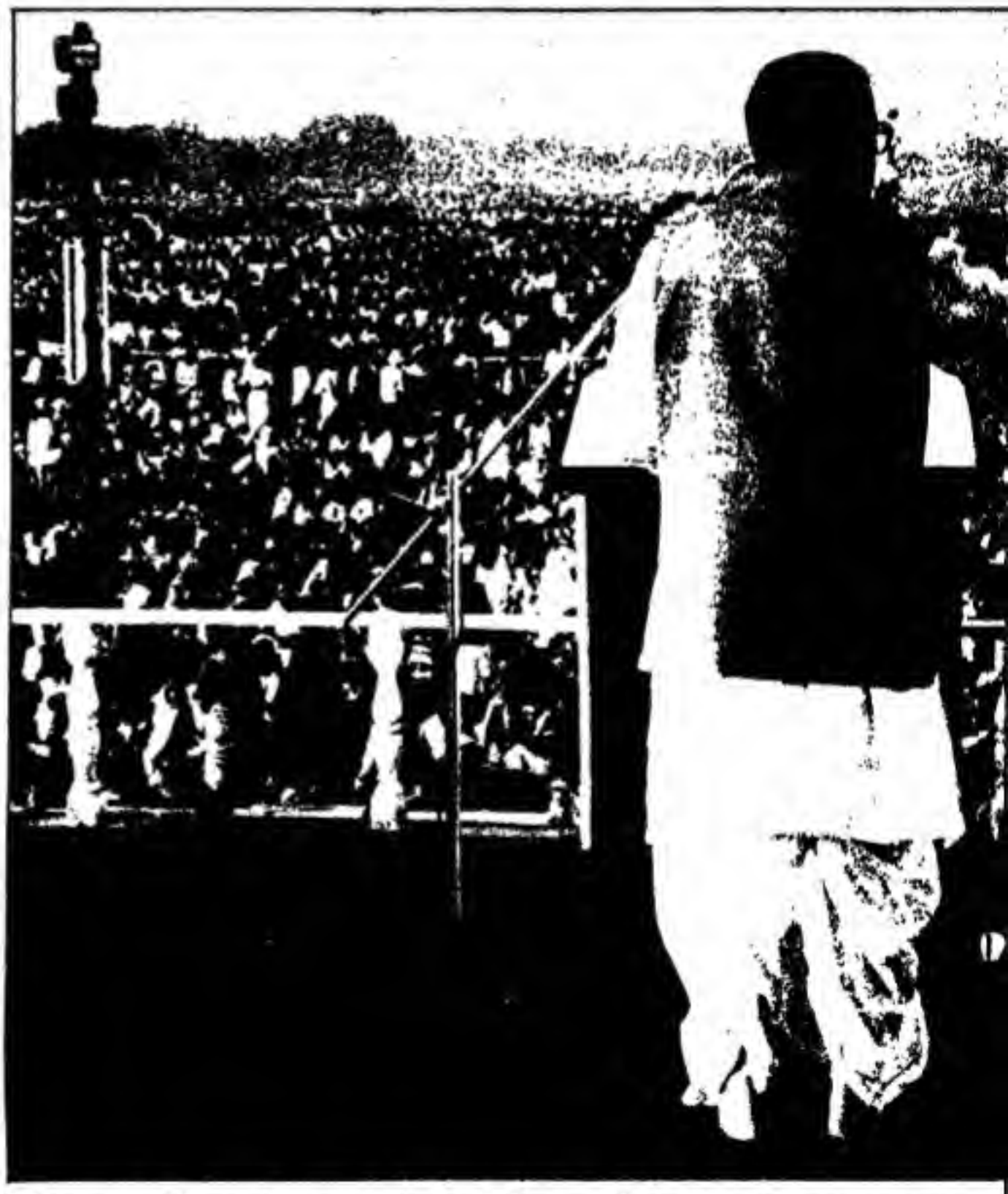
Later, the Congress Working Committee will decide the fate of Amethi Congress watchers say Satish Sharma will probably be retained from the constituency.

But, what about Sitaram Kesri? He's supremely content. Nobody could have stopped Sonia Gandhi from taking her 'rightful' place in the Congress. The whole party was heaping calumny on him. Now they have their talisman. And if the party gets even fewer seats than before —then at least the Sonia Gandhi hoodoo over the Congress would have broken. •

Rajiv Shukla / New Delhi

The CPI(M) is

The party seems ready to go out and share power at the Centre. But has it overcome the resistance within?



It was a watershed meeting, and the East was definitely redder. Jyoti Basu, Harkishen Singh Surjeet, E.K. Nayanar, Prakash Karat, Sitaram Yechury, various central committee (CC) members...all were there at Muzzaffar Ahmed Bhavan, the CPI(M) headquarters in Calcutta, to hammer out a strategy for the Lok Sabha polls. But more importantly, to deliberate on the sticky issue of joining the government at the Centre if it came to such an eventuality.

The all-important three-day meet concluded with Surjeet saying that in case of a United Front (UF) victory at the hustings, the CPI(M) would definitely 'reconsider' its position. "Let the appropriate time come, we will do whatever we need to strengthen the government," he said. It was a clear departure from its earlier line of not joining the government and lending it only outside support. "This stand is a positive response to the country's changing political scenario which demands greater political participation by the Left," says MP and CPI(M) parliamentary party leader Somnath Chatterjee.

But no matter how hard they tried to gloss over the shift, it was there...for all to see. To observers, it appeared that Basu (and Surjeet) had won this round getting the hardliners to toe his line.

The central committee declared that the party would keep its options open. So the fine-print, clearly, was the CPI(M), despite its hoped for all-India role and heightened sense of responsibility, was still not in a position to dictate trends and therefore had to *wait for* and *react to* the political yield of the coming polls.

Yet only 18 months ago, a lonely Basu (with tacit support from Surjeet) pushed and prodded his party to join the UF-led coalition at the Centre. But to no avail. But this time, even Yechury and Karat, bitter critics then of the idea, are more agreeable.

Is the CPI(M), then, ready now to correct the 'historic blunder'?

With a shell-shocked Congress too confused to name its prime ministerial candidate, the CPI(M), unlike the BJP (already touting Vajpayee as the PM-in-waiting), is somehow still not forthright in naming Basu as their nominee. Contrast Surjeet's reluctance to name the party's prime ministerial choice with Somnath Chatterjee's assertion that Basu's "candidature is inevitable". You see a schism somewhere?

So has the debate come full circle? With Jyoti Basu gaining the upper hand and hardliners on the defensive? For almost all of 1997, the octogenarian Marxist remained critical of his party colleagues' decision to stay away from power. Calling it a historic blunder, Basu said, "We have fought Left sectarianism in the past. And we will do it again."

The outburst surprised none, for, in

willin'...

ASHOKE MAZUMDER

the past too, he had been critical of Left orthodoxy. In the Fifties, for instance, he, along with Bhupesh Gupta, was in the minority challenging CPI general-secretary B.T. Ranadive.

Nearly 40 years on, it seems Basu has lost none of his political guiles and still retains his manoeuvring skills. "This has been most apparent in the way he has slowly blunted attacks from his comrades," said a senior party member. Basu certainly cannot have liked the way he had been opposed and the fact that his own colleagues had scuttled his chances of his becoming Prime Minister. The party hierarchy had to bury the issue as a 'closed chapter' to prevent the controversy from getting out of hand.

But for Basu, the 'chapter' was far from closed. He criticised the party's stand on different fora and kept the debate alive for the months to come. The debate snowballed as the year went, dividing the party into distinct, unrelenting camps of hardliners and pro-changers.

The hardliners, led by politburo members Yechury, Karat and Bengal central committee members Anil Biswas, Biman Bose, state secretariat member Nirupam Sen remained stubborn opponents, accusing the pro-changers of corruption and unacceptable links with promoters.

But the pro-changers, led by Basu, and Cabinet colleagues Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, Subhas Chakraborty and Gautam Deb stuck to their guns, insistent on sharing power at the Centre and expanding the party's base beyond its traditional bastions of Bengal, Kerala and Tripura. "We cannot close our eyes and allow ourselves to be overtaken by the changing situation. We should keep pace with it," says Chakraborty.

The central committee decided that the CPI(M) would keep its options open. Was it because the party didn't have enough control over events and thus had to wait to adapt to the poll outcome?

The differences came to a head during the party's organisational polls. Local, zonal, district — at every level, hardliners and pro-changers clashed on whether or not to join the coalition at the Centre. Worse, in the district conferences at Calcutta, Midnapore, Nadia, south 24-Parganas and north 24-Parganas, Basu was relentlessly criticised for his views. The debate generated such heat that party bigwigs often had to intervene to stop the squabble from spilling over to the streets.

The organisational polls in Bengal thus witnessed something unprecedented. So sharp were the differences that at many party conferences the consensus panels of candidates put forward by party managers were rejected. Official panels were challenged by candidates put up by the pro-changer camp. Finally, the new party committees were constituted through elections rather than consensus.

Senior party leaders, however, are unwilling to attach much importance to the debate. Every political party, they argue, has its inner contradictions, and if anything, the debate proves that there *is*

Only 18 months ago, a lonely Basu, with tacit support from Surjeet, pushed and prodded his party to join the UF-led coalition at the Centre. But to no avail

democracy within the CPI(M), and that the Marxist forces of 'dialectics' are at work. "This is what we call democratic centralism. Unlike other political outfits, the CPI(M) comes to a decision only after an issue has been discussed threadbare. The present debate is a natural process. It's the media that is blowing the issue out of proportion and inventing non-existent 'hardliners' and 'pro-changers' within the party," says Left Front chairman Sailen Dasgupta

Anil Biswas, too, resists the suggestion. The central committee member and editor of *Ganashakti*, the CPI(M) mouthpiece, said, "There is nothing 'soft' or 'hard' in our party. There is only one line: the line of the central committee. Everything else is fiction."

Even pro-changers, at least in their public statements, deny any divisions. "This kind of contradiction will be there in all political parties. It is there in the Congress and the BJP as well. Why should we say that debates within the party imply divisions. Of course, there are two schools of thought and the debate is all about that," says a guarded Subhas Chakraborty.

So why did the central committee change its stand on going to the Centre?

Observers feel the schism within the CPI(M) set off alarm bells in the party and the change of stance in the just-concluded CC meeting was to put up a facade of unity for the run-up to the Lok Sabha polls.

But party bosses don't accept that the committee's decision is a departure from its earlier stand. "It's very much consistent. Where is the contradiction?" says Nirupam Sen.

But most leaders concede that the par-

The Front's best man!

But can Jyoti Basu make it this time?

The CPI(M) hasn't ruled it out. The UF is willing. And once more, in the race for the country's top executive job, the octogenarian West Bengal CM is ahead of every potential rival in the United Front.

It looks more than probable that if the Front clinches a workable majority in Parliament, Jyoti Basu will be its prime ministerial choice.

Last fortnight only, Gujral said he would be glad to pass on his mantle if Basu took over the reins. Harkishen Singh Surjeet, too, said "We will decide after the polls," thus refusing to rule him out as the chief executive of the country.

That Basu's name would come up is not surprising. He was the unanimous Front choice for PM in 1996. But policy-makers in his party stood in his way. Even this time, a

Hardliners led by Yechury and Karat then fought the idea tooth and nail. They called the pro-changers corrupt and accused them of questionable links with realtors

ty is reviewing its position. That is to say, the central committee is alive to the changing political realities of the country and is re-adjusting to it. "Our experience in the last 18 months has taught us that there is no alternative to coalitions at the Centre. The Congress has lost its credibility because of corruption and the BJP is communal. That makes the UF the only party upholding secularism and fighting against corruption. This suits us fine. But we will take our final decision only after the polls," says Dasgupta.

Says Chatterjee: "The success of the coalition experiment in Bengal has raised great expectations. People feel the Left should lead the secular forces from the front."

So the debate is far from over, and likely to resume at the central committee meeting to be held at the A.K. Gopalan Centre in New Delhi. The party congress in Calcutta, too, will witness participants debating the issue. "The party congress is significant. Because the programmes and policies adopted in the Seventh Party Congress need a serious review. The communist movement is assuming different dimensions across the world. In the altered context, we need to introspect," says Subhas Chakraborty.

Perhaps, no one in the party is impervious to the winds of change. "We have already set up an updating commission to look into and bring about necessary changes in the party programme of 1964. Once it is done, it will be distributed across the rank and file," said Anil Biswas. So let the elections be over and the party Congress be held, the CPI(M) will perhaps break new ground in its search for socialism. •

Arindam Sarkar/Calcutta

UF victory need not make it easier. For, there will be issues aplenty that will need sorting out before the UF constituents can actually join the government.

"We have differences over economic policies. After all, we are a communist party with a pro-poor agenda and programmes," said Left Front chairman and a central committee member Sailen Dasgupta, hinting at the various conditionalities plaguing the prospect of smooth governance even in case of a UF victory in the polls.

But Somnath Chatterjee feels "Given Basu's experience of leading a coalition in West Bengal for 20 unbroken years, he is perfectly suited for the job."

Basu's acceptability among the various UF constituents has already heightened his profile as the most likely UF nominee for Prime Minister. The perception in the Front, apparently, is that only Basu has the stature, credibility and charisma to take on Atal Behari Vajpayee. But the central committee is still undecided. Has Basu made up his mind?

"The man behind all this is Pranab Mukherjee"

Former Union minister **Ajit Panja** on the decimation of the Congress(I)

INTERVIEWED BY ARINDAM SARKAR/CALCUTTA

Six days after Mamata Banerjee broke away from the Congress and formalised her Trinamool Congress as a distinct entity on 22 December, Ajit Panja, former central minister and MP in the dissolved Lok Sabha, quit the Congress(I) to join Mamata. In this candid, no-holds-barred interview, Panja, who often worked closely with the Congress high command, gives his reasons for leaving the party. More than anybody else, he blames Pranab Mukherjee for the Congress' present plight. Excerpts from the interview:

SUNDAY: Why did you leave the Congress(I)?

Ajit Kumar Panja: My main reason is that after Sitaram Kesri took over as the Congress president, I found that only one person controlled his entire thought process and movements. And this man was Pranab Mukherjee. That was not a problem, till I discovered that he was out to grab all power and concentrate it in his hands with the assistance of certain vested interests. His motive is vicious, he doesn't want anyone to rise in the Congress hierarchy. For instance, the moment he found that Mamata Banerjee was emerging as a power-centre, he planned to finish her career. But he should understand that she can't be finished easily, she is a mass leader.

Secondly, it was at his instance that the present West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee (WBPCC) continuously insulted and humiliated me.

And thirdly, I joined Trinamool Congress because of Mamata Banerjee. She is honest, she has a purpose, and her only goal is the emancipation of West Bengal.

Q: You say that there are certain vested interests behind Pranab Mukherjee. Can you name them?

A: I am trying to find out. I am trying to isolate them. And I can tell you that I have been warned by many that I shouldn't support the cause of Rajiv Gandhi because these interests are against it.

Q: Was Pranab Mukherjee responsible for your removal from Narasimha Rao's Cabinet?

A: Of course On 11 September, 1995, Matang Singh rang me up and asked me to resign from the government. And after one month, the same Matang Singh wrote a letter to me saying: 'Dada, I am not at fault, it was at the instance of Pranab Mukherjee that I did it. I will tell you the whole truth whenever we meet'.

I was in Nagpur when I was asked to step down When I contacted Narasimha Rao, he was surprised. He wanted to know who told me to do so? I said Matang Singh informed me from the ministry and Pranab Mukherjee was by his side. So, I had already sent a fax. Actually, what Mukherjee did was, he compelled Narasimha Rao to remove me by saying that or else others in the party will leave.

Q: You mean to say that he misguided Rao?

A: Yes. He thoroughly corrupted Narasimha Rao. The entire aim of his manoeuverings was to destroy the grassroots leaders of the Congress. His first target was Madhavrao Scindia and L.K. Advani. He advised Narasimha Rao that Havala instrument should be used to destroy these two leaders as they were trying to become Prime Ministers. Narasimha Raoji fell into that trap.

But the truth is it was Pranab Mukherjee who was trying to become the Prime Minister. He used the Havala instrument to demolish his enemies. His aim was to rise. See, for instance, now the entire blame for the decimation of the Congress is falling on Sitaram Kesri. But the man behind all this is Pranab Mukherjee.

In fact, in the last elections, he tried to defeat me by sabotaging my polling booths. I didn't fight against Dipen Ghosh, my CPI(M) rival, but Pranab Mukherjee my own partyman. First, he wanted to finish me by Havala, then he wanted me defeated in the polls. So his aim is to cut to size all those who are coming up. How can I stay in a party which has such a man in it.

Q: Did you warn Narasimha Rao?

A: Yes, I did. Narasimha Rao trusted me very much. So when the Havala scandal broke, I ran to him and said what was he doing! I told him: "Don't attack political leaders like Madhavrao Scindia and L.K. Advani through Havala. If you want to attack them, then do it politically and not by using police force." Rao told me, "I am the Prime Minister, why are you worried? There is not a single charge against you." But I still pleaded. And then he finally said, "Look Ajit, Pranab told me the image of Congress will improve if I do this." What a wrong advice! See the condition of the Congress.

And months later, it was the same man, who drafted Narasimha Rao's resignation letter from the presidentship of the Congress and shifted his loyalty to Sitaram Kesri.

Q: But why was Narasimha Rao and now Sitaram Kesri blindly listening

"I left Congress(I) because only one person controlled Sitaram Kesri's entire thought process and movements. And this man was Pranab Mukherjee. He is trying to concentrate all power in his hands with the assistance of certain vested interests"

to Pranab Mukherjee?
A: Pranab Mukherjee uses brainwashing techniques to blind people. And he completely brainwashed the two Congress presidents. I don't blame any of them. You see, I took almost two decades to understand him, in spite of knowing him so closely.

Q: Why does Pranab Mukherjee command so much influence?
A: It was Siddhartha Shankar Ray who took him to Indira Gandhi. He was a primary school teacher at that time. And since then, he is in New Delhi and has politically manoeuvered so well that over the years he has emerged as a real power-broker. And today, he is using the Congress to serve his own selfish interests.

In fact, only Rajiv Gandhi understood him best. He thoroughly understood his machinations and guile. It was Rajiv who exposed him.

Q: You mean to say even Indira Gandhi failed to read him?
A: Indira Gandhi understood. Or else, she wouldn't have had such a close relationship with Barkat Ghani Khan Chowdhury. After all, Ghani Khan Chowdhury is against Pranab Mukherjee. But she knew that he (Barkat) was a complete loyalist and wouldn't do anything mischievous. So she relied heavily on Barkat.

But immediately after Indira Gandhi's death, his intentions came to the surface. On hearing the tragic news, in the aircraft itself, he said that he was the number two in the Cabinet.

Q: But the Congress can't do without him...
A: You see, it will do in the long run. After all, Congress is like a big banyan tree, a 112-year-old party. Some roots become rotten at times, and they have to be removed.

Q: Pranab Mukherjee is not a mass-based leader. Yet, he has managed to remain at the top. What is the secret of his success?
A: I will say 'fall-out' and not 'secret'. Look, he remains in the Congress, and everybody else is leaving the party. This is what he has achieved. So the solution is: he should be thrown out so that rank and file can return to the party.

Rao (left) and Kesri: "Pranab Mukherjee has misguided both of them"

Q: But what keeps him going? After all, he is just a Rajya Sabha member?
A: Mischievous manoeuverings.

Q: Does he play a role in the WBPCC as well?
A: Of course, his one leg is in the PCC and the other in the AICC. He is keeping both the options open. If he can become Prime Minister, well and good. If not, then chief ministership will do.

Q: But is the PCC dependent on him?
A: Yes, very much. From where will the PCC get money to run their day-to-day affairs. You have to depend on someone to give the money. I know it very well, because I myself held the post of PCC chief once. I needed Rs 25,000 per month. AICC used to give it. But now, where is that fund? So they are completely depending on Pranab Mukherjee. And in the process, he is controlling the state organisation. It's his fiefdom. I can understand the dilemma of Somen Mitra.

To tell you the truth, it is Somen and Mamata who can keep the party together. They are full-time workers. They maintain day-to-day connection with the people. But Somen Mitra has also fallen into the trap of Pranab Mukherjee. In fact, when the PCC rejected mine and Banerjee's recommendations, he (Mitra) personally told me: "Ajitda I have compulsions." I very well understand his dilemma. So you see, what is happening in West Bengal is more than politics, and Mamata Banerjee's expulsion was the last straw. I couldn't take it anymore. So I had to part ways and join the Trinamool Congresss.

Q: You mean to say Mamata Banerjee was ousted at the behest of Pranab Mukherjee?
A: Absolutely. Tell me, what is the interest of Sitaram Kesri in having Mamata Banerjee out of the Congress?

You see, today our brain is in the Rajya Sabha and our body is in the Lok Sabha. Our affairs are being dictated by people who have no contact with the masses. They can't feel the pulse of the masses, but dictate the policies of the party. Kesri and his men are saying, please come and join the Congress. But they can't hear what people are saying. How can you expect such a party to do well?

Q: But now that Sonia Gandhi has decided to campaign for the Congress, where does it place Pranab Mukherjee?
A: This is a very good development. We have personally told Soniaji that she must become the president of the AICC. Or else, it is impossible to rejuvenate the Congress. You have to be practical, people realise she has been an witness to personal tragedies — the death of Indira, Rajiv and Sanjay. They will support her. And even we, who have left the Congress, are with her. And nothing will satisfy the Congress workers until and unless she becomes the AICC president.

And if this happens, Pranab Mukherjee will automatically get washed out. And she will know what to do; we will be by her side. We will see to it that he doesn't enter 10 Janpath.

Remember what Pranab said when Sonia Gandhi became a primary member of the Congress. He said, "She is just a primary member So what?" Everyone remembers what he said. •

RAJIV SHUKLA

Shift of stance

Muslims will not vote en masse *against the BJP this time*

Ayodhya does not appear to be an election issue at all this time. Even Bal Thackeray, who had taken credit for the demolition of the Babri Masjid immediately after the structure was pulled down, has changed tack. He is now in favour of a national monument being built at the disputed site, instead of any religious structure. Farooq Abdullah was the first to put forward this idea in 1991, as he did not want either a temple or a mosque to be built at the troubled spot.

Atal Behari Vajpayee has always been opposed to the idea of including the Ayodhya issue in the BJP's election agenda. And now, gradually, the entire party leadership is coming around to Vajpayee's moderate line. The VHP had tried to revive the issue by threatening to launch agitations in Kanshi and Mathura. But it got no response from either the people or the BJP. The BJP leadership was quick to clarify that Kanshi and Mathura did not figure on the party's agenda.

Then again, UP chief minister Kalyan Singh, immediately after assuming office, declared that priority would be given to Ayodhya. But under pressure from the party high-command, Singh has now stopped talking about Ayodhya. Even the inhabitants of Ayodhya no longer attach too much importance to the issue. Things have come to such a pass that Vinay Katiyar, Bajrang Dal chief and one of the architects of the Ayodhya movement, is not sure of bagging the Ayodhya parliamentary seat.

The Congress and the United Front are also not paying any attention to the Ram Mandir issue. They seem to have realised that raking up this matter will only work to the BJP's advantage. Unlike the previous election, the UF and the Congress are not using Ayodhya as a weapon against the BJP. Instead, they have launched a two-pronged attack:

The Ayodhya issue no longer figures on the election agendas of the major political parties. The BJP does not really need to play on religious sentiments to grab votes; the Congress and the UF realise that raking up the matter will only work to the BJP's advantage

accusing the BJP of promoting criminals in politics and encouraging defections to grab power. There is practically no mention of Ayodhya in public speeches these days. Mulayam Singh Yadav is the only one who still makes it a point to raise the Ayodhya issue — but only in Muslim-dominated gatherings.

The BJP is doing the right thing by going easy on Hindutva. The party appears to be in a position of strength, simply as an alternative to the Congress or the UF. It does not need to appeal to religious sentiments to grab votes.

With the BJP deciding not to pander to Hindu sentiments, the so-called 'secular' parties should also not try and fan Muslim fundamentalism in a bid to stop the saffron brigade. The recent statements of Shahi Imam Bukhari and Naib Iman Bukhari have clearly exposed some of these parties who are desperate to use the 'anti-Muslim' plank against the BJP. The Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid has declared that 'secular' forces, including the Janata Dal, the Samajwadi Party and the Congress, will not be able to gain Muslim votes this time by simply intimidating them about the dangers of BJP rule.

In Jaipur recently, the Shahi Imam took the Muslim community there by surprise when he came out strongly in favour of BJP-run state governments. Bukhari practically appealed to the Muslims to vote for the BJP as it had given protection and provided all facilities to Muslims in Rajasthan and Maharashtra.

The manner in which Muslim leaders are making a beeline for the BJP is indication enough that this time, this community is not going to vote *en masse* against the BJP. And even the slightest swing in the Muslim votes could upset poll plans of the 'secular' parties. •

RAZOR SHARP

Revenue secretary N.K. Singh is making things happen in the finance ministry

Here are some things that you probably didn't know about N.K. Singh, the revenue secretary, who has been ubiquitous in the era of the Voluntary Disclosure of Income Scheme (VDIS).

• Singh's father was also revenue secretary and expenditure secretary. Singh occupies his father's old office.

• His brother-in-law is Nikhil Kumar, the former police commissioner of Delhi and now special secretary in the home ministry.

• Singh was about to become the home secretary when K. Padmanabhaiah retired. He is now a favourite to become finance secretary when Montek Singh Ahluwalia goes home to the World Bank/IMF. Of course Singh says he doesn't want the job.

• Singh was at St Stephens with Mani Shankar Aiyar who he had the distinction of defeating in every single debate. But Aiyar went on to Cambridge while Singh remained in India. No matter. Aiyar says Singh made up for his lack of British breeding; he is the only man in history to have returned with an Oxbridge accent from a posting in Tokyo.

• Singh is independently wealthy and lives in great style in an elegant house at Vasant Vihar. He is so well-known for his expensive tastes that when he became expenditure secretary, it was said that he was born for the job.

• His wealth enables him to sneer at those who come bearing bribes. A famous London-based Sindhi family once offered to take him shopping. Singh contemptuously turned it down. He did not take bribes; besides the Sindhis were only offering to take him to Marks & Spencer's.

• He denies, however, that his suits come from Saville Row. As anyone who has seen him will concede that he is probably telling the truth when he says that they are made by Shamim & Shamim, the neighbourhood tailors. It is not clear whether his shirts come from Jermyn Street but it is true that he favours the kind of yellow Hermes tie preferred by merchant bankers who go to power lunches.

• When he was additional secretary in Manmohan Singh's finance ministry, people were surprised by how quickly he became indispensable to the finance minister.

According to sources, this was because NK knew how to get things done while Ahluwalia and Shankar Acharya were better at making models. Said one civil servant at the time, "This man has the finance ministry by the b***s."

• Singh also became P. Chidambaram's favourite for much the same sort of reason. While other bureaucrats have huffed and puffed but failed to turn the economy around leaving inventories piling up in shops and industrialists weeping, NK has been able to provide visible evidence that things are happening at the finance ministry.

The most recent example is the VDIS scheme. Despite the bad jokes about the VDIS acronym, Singh has managed to make it a household name. It is impossible to open a newspaper or turn on your television set without getting a full dose of the double acronyms: VDIS and NK.

If the scheme is a success — and at the moment it looks as though it will reach its target — then it will allow Chidambaram the opportunity to bow out on the crest of a ripple. He may not have turned the economy around, but at least he allowed lots of black marketeers to turn their black money into white.

Expect to see many pictures of NK and Chidambaram hamming it up for the cameras and grinning delightedly when this happens.

• Manmohan Singh, Chidambaram and...? Not to worry. If the next finance

According to insiders, Singh (lighting the lamp) knows how to get things done. Says one civil servant, "This man has the finance ministry by the b*s"**

minister is the BJP's Jaswant Singh, then NK is all right again. He may disagree with Jaswant's anti-Nariman Point crusade, but there's a family connection of sorts. NK's wife is related to Gaj Singh, the former Maharaja of Jodhpur, and Jaswant is a Thakur from Jodhpur.

Despite the fact that he is the most 'happening' bureaucrat in the country today, NK has not let fame or importance go to his head. He is unfailingly polite, will always return phone calls, will pull up his staff if they are offhand to visitors or callers and if he gives you an appointment, he will always keep it. More to the point, he will never show off, or flaunt his closeness to his minister.

It helps that he was close to L.N. Mishra, then Mrs Gandhi's right-hand man, within a few years of joining the civil service. He also worked closely with such influential ministers as D.P. Chattopadhyay and Pranab Mukherjee during their power periods. So, he is no stranger to power, having seen it at a young age.

• But don't let the smoothness, the paintings, the photography and the love of the good life fool you. This man is razor sharp. He knows the Indian economy inside out and will never forget a figure, a face or for that matter, a slight.

• One reason why Singh makes such a brilliant civil servant — apart from his obvious intellect — is that having been born to privilege, he is one of the few bureaucrats who loves governance because it is in his blood.

He doesn't need money and he turned down the political option — his mother Madhuri Singh represented Purnea in the Lok Sabha — because he thought that the civil service represented an honourable career option.

This is why he has stuck with the IAS. He could easily have taken the World Bank/IMF option — he has sent scores of people to Washington to work for the Fund and the Bank. But his heart remains in North Block.

The betting is that N.K. Singh will be Cabinet secretary one day. And he will probably be as good at that job as he has been as revenue secretary. •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

Confused Bureau

The Supreme Court has freed the CBI of government control. But will the vigilance commission's supervision be of any help?

On 18 December, the Supreme Court passed a landmark judgement. It removed the single directive that governed the Central Bureau of Investigation, gave its director a minimum term of two years and put the organisation under the overall supervision of the Central Vigilance Commission

Many people believe this has freed the CBI from political interference, removed the protective walls politicians and bureaucrats had built for themselves and finally made everyone equal in the eyes of the law.

Is this optimism justified? Some shackles have been removed. But is the CBI really free from political pressure? Here's a reader's guide to understanding the bureau that has been under public and judicial scrutiny ever since the Jain *havala* cases were filed one year ago.

Q: What was the single directive and how did it hamper CBI's functioning?

A: It was 1986. Rajiv Gandhi had been in office for two years with his Mr Clean image intact. Everyone was talking of catching the big fish. There was only one organisation capable of doing that — the CBI. Under Mohan Katre's direction, the bureau went on the offensive. High-profile raids were conducted almost daily, and inevitably the most common targets were the keepers of the babu raj — the bureaucracy. In fact, between 1986 and 1988, the bureau must have registered perhaps the highest number of cases ever against senior bureaucrats.

This was also the time that the CBI first began to get publicity, so much so that for the first time, it began issuing monthly bulletins for interested readers.

Things went well for a time. Then Bofors happened and bureaucrats recovered enough from the initial shock to put up a fight. In January 1988, the ministry of personnel under the then minister of state, P. Chidambaram, passed the special directive. Initially it concerned only officers of the level of joint secretary and above. It said.

"In regard to a decision-making level officer .. there should be prior consultation with the Secretary of the Ministry/Department concerned before SPE (the Act that governs the CBI) takes up any enquiry, including ordering search... Without this concurrence, no enquiry shall be initiated by the SPE..."

This put a full stop to the CBI's anti-corruption drive. Very simply, "this concurrence" was not given. And when it was given, it was against a selected few. A legacy that carried on till the Jain *havala* case.

The single directive was amended a number of times to include public sector officers and senior officers of the Reserve Bank of India and nationalised banks. Amendments were made as late as December 1996 when the finance ministry formed a board to look into bank frauds and forced the CBI to go cap in hand to the board for basic documents.

In January 1988, the ministry of personnel under the then minister of state, P. Chidambaram, issued a directive forbidding enquiries against top-level officials without government concurrence

And so, while the bureau was found exceptionally competent in solving other crimes quickly, its track record on corruption cases became dismal. By the time Narasimha Rao was through with it, the CBI had lost all credibility.

Q: How and why did the Supreme Court abolish the single directive?

A: It was January 1996, ten years after the anti-corruption drive had begun. The Jain *havala* case had happened and 20-odd politicians had been charge-sheeted, including

# of Investigation?

some sitting ministers of the Rao government. There was a maelstrom of public jubilation. *Now* politicians will pay for their misdeeds, it was said. *Now* they will finally realise that corruption doesn't pay. For five years the CBI sat tight

"Any such directive which protects any section of people is unconstitutional, illegal and bad in law," says former law minister Shanti Bhushan

on the Jain diaries. *Now*, it was said, justice will be done.

Well, the 20-odd charge-sheeted politicians are still sitting pretty in their bungalows. All but two charge sheets have been thrown out in the preliminary stages for lack of even prima facie evidence.

The CBI has thrown up its hands. Their defence: "Why do you think we hadn't filed charges for so long? Because we didn't have any evidence. But the Supreme Court pressurised us into charge-sheeting these politicians. And if the charge sheets have been thrown out of court, it's hardly our fault."

So what was it? Was there really nothing to the Jain diaries? Was it a birthday-party guest list used by Narasimha Rao for personal and political vendetta! And has the CBI really done its job?

Yes and no.

Yes, Rao did use the diaries for harassing *some people* he believed were a threat to him. And No, not all of them were innocent. The CBI has *not* done its job well.

The CBI used, what crime writer Rex Stout once described as Method Two. Tell a simple lie, garnish it with interesting bits of truth and stick to the story.

First, the CBI sat on the case for five years because its political masters told it to. The single directive meant that the CBI had no option but to shut up.

Second, there was enough evidence to be found against some politicians. And despite the flurry of raids, interrogations and harassments, it was either conveniently 'not found' or if found, not produced before court (with the notable exception of Arif Mohd Khan). The CBI got away with it because in the earlier dispensation, it could force the public prosecutor to file the charge sheet even if it was obviously incomplete.

Says Ashok Panda, advocate on record assisting the amicus curiae, Anil Divan, in the *havala* case, "The court has found CBI's method of investigation and the kind of evidence it has produced very unsatisfactory."

For instance, he says, "Till the end the CBI hasn't gone into the root question of the terrorist connection. They picked up two Kashmiri militants from Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University. The same man who funded them also sent Rs 62 crore into the country through the *havala* route. Some of this has been recovered. But till now, the CBI has been unable to rule out that this money went to the politicians. It is very disturbing to think that people from outside may be directing what our politicians do."

But while many politicians may have got away in the Jain case, it had an inadvertent but welcome fallout. It brought the CBI under intense public and judicial scrutiny.

It was in this case that Justice J.S. Verma (now Chief Justice of India) began to realise the abuse the CBI was open to. While Vijaya Rama Rao was still director, the court directed him to stop taking orders from anyone "who might be a possible accused" (meaning Narasimha Rao), then began to overlook the investigations.

The shock came when the charge sheets were filed and were found to contain no evidence at all. Vineet Narayan, the original petitioner, questioned the CBI's investigative methods. At the same time, another petition was filed regarding the missing pages in the Vohra Committee report (on the politician-criminal nexus). Yet another petition questioned the appointment of R.C. Sharma as the CBI director while on extension.

The Supreme Court had by this time got tired of overlooking each CBI case. Finally, in November, says Panda, "The court decided that instead of having to supervise each and every case, it was time we found a solution to the problems of the CBI." So the *havala* Bench asked the government for recommendations.

The government formed an independent review committee comprising principal secretary to the Prime Minister N.N. Vohra, former Cabinet secretary B.G. Deshmukh and cent. al vigilance commissioner S.V. Giri. On 2 December, the committee submitted its report to the court.

Its recommendations:

• Give the CBI more autonomy by giving its director a minimum term of two years.

• Retain the single directive but fix a time limit for departments to give their permission

• Let the Central Vigilance Commission supervise the CBI.

The court then asked amicus curiae Anil Divan to look into the matter. He agreed on the CBI director's tenure, threw out the IRC recommendation on retaining the single directive and was apparently quiet on the question of the CVC overlooking the bureau. A few people had begun to realise by then that the CVC had been a member of the committee that made the recommendation.

But the court in its wisdom decided to accept the government's proposal and put the CBI under the vigilance commissioner's supervision

And that is where the problem lies.

Q: Has the court order really freed the CBI from political interference?

A: The removal of the single directive has gone a long way in overcoming legal hurdles and there is little difference of opinion in judicial circles that it was a good thing. Says senior advocate and former law minister Shanti Bhushan, "I think it's an excellent judgement. Every person who commits a crime has to be dealt equally under the law. Any such directive which protects any section of people is unconstitutional, illegal and bad in law."

Vijaya Rama Rao: told not to take orders from anyone "who might be a possible accused"

Chief Justice J.S. Verma: realised the abuse the CBI was open to

BJP member and advocate Arun Jaitley agrees, "To have a politician or any directive interfere with the functions of the police is jurisprudentially not correct." A former Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court says, "A legal caste system in a democracy is not a good concept. And that the single directive was."

But to put the CBI under the charge of the CVC is being viewed as an ill-informed and ineffective judgement. Says former Delhi Police chief Ved Marwah, "The CVC is not competent to handle this kind of a job. You need a more broad-based body to overlook the CBI."

Says a former home secretary, "Everyone knows that the CVC is the most useless body ever made. It is toothless, its departmental enquiries take years. No one is deterred by it."

There is a reason for this. First, apart from its known incompetence, the CVC is not an independent body. Second, the commissioner's post has generally been handed out to satisfy a septuagenarian's ego. Third, though the court has directed that the commissioner should be appointed with the consent of the leader of the Opposition, his livelihood depends on the government.

And finally, the vigilance commission has experience of dealing with minor corruption matters. It has never had any dealings with other special crimes that the CBI looks into, like bombings, riots and high-profile political crime. How will the commission evaluate the CBI's performance in such cases?

Says a senior CBI officer, "The CVC is a post office. We have to take advice from them only on corruption cases regarding government servants. Even that advice is not mandatory. We see the CVC as an unnecessary clerk in the system and a pain in the neck."

Besides all this, the CBI director is still a government appointee and vulnerable to political pressure. The presence of another government-dependent bureaucrat in the middle hardly frees him from that pressure.

That is the problem now. Though the bureau's legal shackles have been removed, it has been operationally shackled to a commission that knows nothing of investigation.

And the CBI, that in recent years had gained notoriety as the Congress Bureau of Investigation, fears that it might pass into oblivion as the Confused Bureau of Investigation. •

Sarita Rani/New Delhi

MAN OF THE YEAR, 1997

THE PRESIDEN

K.R. Narayanan is velvet and steel

Much was made of the fact that a Dalit was becoming President of India, when Kocheril Raman Narayanan took over in July this year. His rival, who was left far behind in the contest, T.N. Seshan, went so far as to say that Narayanan had won the election "only because he was a Dalit".

Nothing could be further from the truth. Dalit or not, in the six months that he's been in power, not once has Narayanan indicated that his allegiance is to anything but the Constitution of India.

Here is a profile of SUNDAY's Man Of 1997: the man of velvet and steel, the President of India, K.R. Narayanan.

"You could say," said the President of India, the supreme commander of its armed forces, the man holding India's most powerful job, "That I came into politics because of unemployment."

An imp of a smile danced on his face

K.R. Narayanan had spent three years as India's ambassador in the United States and had returned home to a pension and a small flat in Delhi's Yamuna Apartments, writing articles for newspapers and wondering what he was going to do. It had struck him that he might contest an election. He had tried, upon returning to Delhi, to get an appointment with Indira Gandhi — not to ask her for anything but as a courtesy call by a returning ambassador. The appointment could not come through as she was extremely preoccupied.

He sent a message through a certain highly-placed civil servant asking for an appointment. It never came through and he didn't press it. Then the 1980 elections were declared, he decided to meet her, to tell her he wanted to contest a Lok Sabha seat.

"Where would you like to contest from?" Mrs Gandhi asked him. "Kerala, my home state," he said. "Can you give me a list of constituencies?" she asked. Narayanan did, and she noted it down on a piece of paper. When the then chief minister of Kerala, K. Karunakaran did allot him a constituency, it was clear that it was a seat which had been written off by the Congress. Ottapalam had been a Marxist stronghold for many years. K. Karunakaran was gracious but patronising when he told Kerala newspapers that he was hopeful of the Congress(I) doing well in Kerala "Ottapalam"? he responded to a specific question. "Well, that seat has been held by the Marxist party so far..."

K.R. Narayanan was a direct recruit, appointed by the party president herself who had by-passed the chief minister. It

The President with BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee

V RAJAGOPAL

Narayanan now faces the greatest challenge of all: to protect India's democracy from assaults from within

wasn't hard to understand why the chief minister was a little miffed. Karunakaran figured that if Narayanan won his seat, it would be a bonus for the Congress and if he didn't well then Mrs Gandhi would just have to find him something else to do.

Never one to turn away from a challenge, Narayanan fought and won that election and subsequently, two more from the same constituency. After a career in politics, unblemished by controversy, he now faces the greatest challenge of all: to protect India's democracy from assaults from within, to stay aloof from quick-fix solutions, to defend dignity and justice.

The President of India is bound by the advice of the Prime Minister and the council of ministers. To clear his mind and clarify issues, he can ask anyone — scholar, civil servant, judge — for help. But he cannot turn down a decision taken by a legally-elected government.

Earlier this year, it almost came to that. The textiles minister, the defence minister and the railway minister told the Prime Minister the government in Uttar Pradesh must be dismissed. The Prime Minister pleaded with his ministers that this could not be done until the chief minister had been given a chance to prove his majority in the House.

The ministers were unmoved. One of the allies of the Kalyan Singh government had withdrawn support to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Kalyan Singh was in a minority, they argued. UP was facing a constitutional crisis. The President must act and impose President's Rule in the state, they said.

The more the government argued with itself the more remote a solution looked. Mulayam Singh Yadav and R.L. Jalappa said that the United Front (UF) was committed to fighting communalism. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) had withdrawn its support to the Kalyan Singh government. This was a chance for the UF to act in favour of secular forces.

The UP situation was complicated by the fact that the Speaker of the Assembly, who was a member of the BJP, had ruled that a faction of the BSP had split. According to the anti-defection law, one-third of the party MLAs had to cross over for it to qualify as a split. The MLAs who had come to the BJP did not number one-third. Mulayam Singh and Jalappa said that the BJP was trying to induce splits by bribery and promise of office.

The Prime Minister had to make a choice: it was either to face a rebellion from within the government and let the BJP

Narayanan's decision during the ... that the President was above po...

RUPINDER SHARMA

The President at a Remo Fernandes show in Goa

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face a vote-of-confidence; or take a political decision of imposing President's Rule without giving the BJP a chance to prove its majority.

The council of ministers forced the PM to recommend to the President that he dissolve the UP Assembly. Narayanan called for the advice of the attorney-general and told him to spell out the law. Politics, he already knew about.

He then did something few Presidents have ever done; he returned the govern-

The President with N. Chandrababu Naidu (left) and G.K. Moopanar

ment's decision to the council of ministers, and indicated that he wouldn't change his mind.

Had the government been adamant — as it seemed it might be, at one point — the President would have been deeply embarrassed, for he can return a decision of the council of ministers only once for reconsideration.

But he took the risk. The result was that he established that the office of the President was above politicking and lobbying.

K.R. Narayanan has spent most of life fighting the tendency that makes most of us resort to patchwork solutions to moral problems. Some of the most difficult years were spent at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) where he was appointed vice-chancellor. The Emergency had just been lifted and as JNU had been a hotbed of subversive activity — several stu-

dents had been arrested from the campus — the mood was restive. On one occasion, angry students hijacked public buses and lined them as a convoy inside the campus, threatening to set fire to them if their demands were not met.

Narayanan didn't want the police to enter the campus. But the police told him plainly that if the students damaged public property, they would have no option but to storm the campus and arrest some of them.

He undertook delicate negotiations — both with the students and the home secretary. A particularly belligerent student was calmed with the help of another who was influential on the campus, though no longer studying in JNU. Sitaram Yechury, now a member of the CPI(M)'s central committee was a union leader, and Prakash Karat, the tempering influence.

Narayanan used the same velvet and steel technique recently, when he had to sort out the problem in the Election Commission. When G.V.G. Krishnamurthy, an election commissioner, took umbrage at the 'slight' by Chief Election Commissioner M.S. Gill, it was Narayanan who soothed GVG's ruffled feathers and persuaded him to go back to work in the interests of the country.

It is his personal style — a self-deprecating sense of humour, courtesy and the marked absence of manipulativeness — which makes Narayanan so endearing. In his position, most people would remember triumphs like a First from the London School of Economics, landslide election victories in the face of stiff opposition, and a successful stint in China where he went as India's ambassador, the first to be posted there after a gap of nearly two decades.

But Narayanan's memories are of the time when he came to Delhi in 1943, and after quitting the government — he was employed in the Overseas Department at the princely salary of Rs 275 a month — he joined a magazine, Lanka Sundaram's Commerce and Industry at a salary of Rs 100 a month. His friends then were a colleague called Thapaliyal and another called Jag Mohan, who was an art critic and wrote many books, among them one on sex!

Narayanan has written several books himself, has been a politician, diplomat and journalist and already the Rashtrapati Bhavan bears the imprint of his personality. Reporters who stood shivering outside The Palace almost all of last month to cover the crisis leading to the announcement of general elections were touched to find arrangements for hot tea and coffee

RUPINDER SHARMA

ordered by the President himself. Banquets at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, once stiff and starched affairs, are now easy and relaxed, with the President, Usha Narayanan, and daughter Chitra, coming up to the guests and personally chatting with them. Nor are the guests scruffy politicians and itinerant industrialists. They are bureaucrats, scholars, artists and writers.

K.R. Narayanan has just presided over one chapter of contemporary Indian history. Another will begin when the new Lok Sabha comes into being after the elections. He has already displayed his objectivity in arbitrating over trickier issues of politics. Much more will be asked of him in the next six months. •

Aditi Phadnis/New Delhi

Narayanan's deprecating sense of humour, courtesy and the marked absence of manipulativeness makes him so endearing

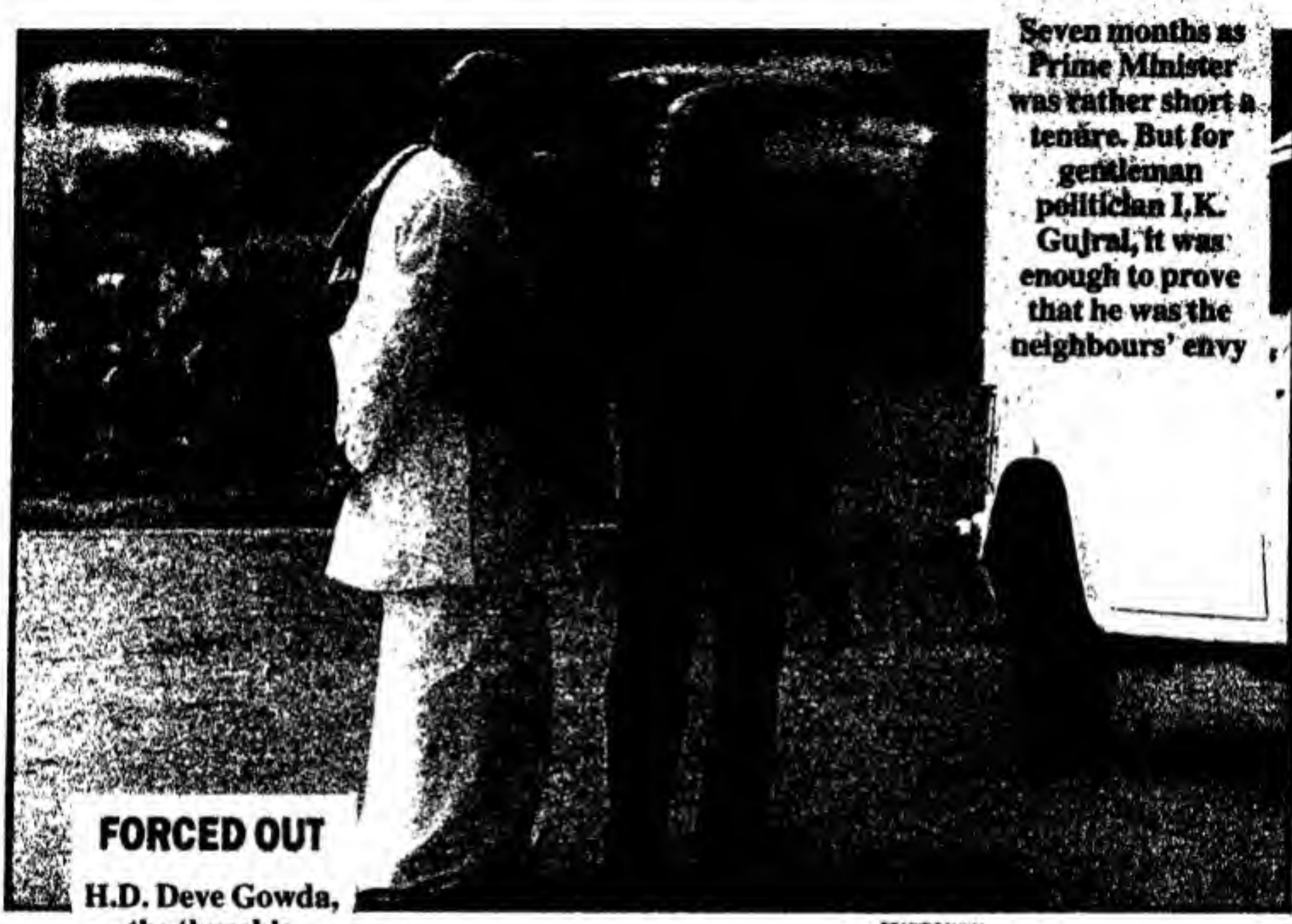
1997 THE YEAR THAT WAS

INDEPENDENT INDIA TURNS FIFTY

Even as freedom fever gripped the country, cutting across social, cultural and regional lines, many wondered what was there to celebrate

SO LONG, FAREWELL

Seven months as Prime Minister was rather short a tenure. But for gentleman politician I.K. Gujral, it was enough to prove that he was the neighbours' envy



FORCED OUT

H.D. Deve Gowda, the 'humble farmer' from Karnataka, was humbled in the murky world of politics and intrigue which ended his prime ministership in June

PRADIP SANYAL

THE ROUTING OF RAO

Narasimha Rao suffered reverses as Prime Minister and Congress president because of scandals. But the economic reforms he launched are irreversible

PRADIP SANYAL

THE KING-WRECKER

As Congress president, Sitaram Kesri seemed to be in a terrible hurry to get to the top seat. The man who toppled two prime ministers now finds himself in a mess due to his own machinations

CRISIS IN COALITION

The interim report of the Jain Commission, which was probing the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, proved to be the undoing of the United Front government. Result: the country is heading towards another election in less than two years' time

ALOKE MITRA

THE RUPEE PLUNGES

Indian currency touched an all-time low against the US dollar. But experts say that it's not as bad as the case of the Asian Tigers

V RAJAGOPAL

CASHING IN

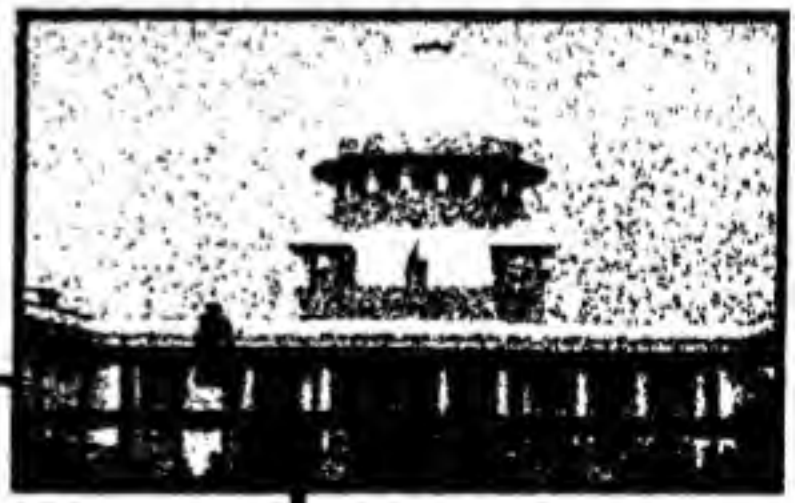
P. Chidambaram presented the best Budget, though circumstances forced a slowdown of the economy that might continue for a while

FREE AGENTS

The Supreme Court freed the country's premier investigative agency, the CBI, from governmental interference

PRASAR BHARATI

The long-awaited autonomy of the print and the electronic media is about to happen. But will the atmosphere at Mandi House change?



BANNING OF BANDHS

The Supreme Court ruled that *bandhs* were illegal, triggering dissent among political parties who felt the verdict was undemocratic, robbing them of an instrument of protest

THE SPACE GIRL

Indian-born Kalpana Chawla was the country's first woman in space. On board space shuttle Columbia, Kalpana showed extraordinary presence of mind

SCORPVIEWS

RUPINDER SHARMA

BOOK VALUE

Arundhati Roy raked in a cool Rs 3.5 crore as advance for her debut novel and then went on to win the Booker. Controversies, court cases, disgruntled critics — *The God of Small Things* has seen them all and still remains at the top of the bestseller list

THE DYNAMIC DUO

Leander Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi were on a roll. They ended up second best in the ATP World Doubles Championship at Hartford, Connecticut

DIANA-MITE

Twenty-four-year-old Diana Hayden became Miss World 1997. Quoting from Yeats to clinch the title, the dusky beauty from India didn't mind sounding like a material girl when she spoke of spending most of the US$ 95,000 prize money on her family

MR RELIABLE

Sourav Ganguly had started off on a cautious note. But now, the southpaw's bat is doing the talking despite Indian cricket's fluctuating fortunes

ASHOK MAJUMDAR

IN MEMORIAM

Mother Teresa, the messiah of Calcutta's poor and destitutes, passed away quietly on the night of 5 September. Her funeral attracted world media attention as princes and paupers lined up to pay homage. Efforts are on to speed up the canonisation of the 'saint of the gutters'

ALOKE MITRA

Partners in progress

UK's business ambassador Swraj Paul pins British hopes on Bengal

The British marines are coming back to Calcutta, 50 years after the empire's demise. On 29 January, HMS Coventry of the Royal Navy will berth in the city with a 350-strong troop on board. But for a change, the message it will send to the shore is going to be cooperation and development, instead of domination and exploitation.

Not only is this reflected in the former imperial power's changed attitude to the erstwhile colony, but also by the business acumen shown by the new Labour government of the United Kingdom.

The Labour Party's rout in the elections after its last tenure in office in the late Seventies had been attributed largely to its anti-capitalist image. This time, however, it has sought to recover its losses by adopting innovative policies. The appointment of business ambassadors is one of these new measures. They include captains of industry such as chairmen of British Airways and British Telecom, and their brief is to "promote British trade and highlight British expertise and technology".

Lord Swraj Paul, chairman of the prestigious Caparo Group and business ambassador from Britain, was in Calcutta recently to forecast "another busy year in the East", which will be heralded by the visit of HMS Coventry.

The ship, which is the last of the batch II Type 22 Frigades having a place in the *Guinness Book of Records* for the 'earliest time of launch', will carry representatives from the British business and industry. "It will provide a unique platform for talks on industry and business," said Lord Paul. The focus, explained deputy high commissioner Simon Scaddan, will be on "environmental technologies and advanced manufacturing techniques".

The vessel's four-day visit is to coincide with the Calcutta Book Fair, which has Britain as its focal theme this year. While that event would bring in a number of British writers, artists and entertainers, there is also something in store for the more commercially minded.

Despite political uncertainties, British investment in India is increasing, reflecting UK's confidence in India's long-term potential, said Lord Paul. "There's always an element [of uncertainty] when an election is taking place. It's a natural instinct for anybody to react. But I think the world has realised that India is now at such a point where there's no way of stopping the reforms," he said

Lord Swraj Paul: eastward ho

Therein lies the renewed British interest in India, and the business ambassador stressed, "The UK's interest in eastern India and Calcutta is increasing." According to him, 1997 was a very "productive year" in this respect. "Work continued behind the scenes" and new ventures have been launched in this region. He listed some of these:

• SIMCO, UK, has bought the Philips Telecom factory in Calcutta to manufacture mobile telecom equipment.

• The SEMA Group, a British-French joint venture, has set up a software development centre in Calcutta to produce and service its world renowned telecom software.

• Coal India's Jharia mines project has been awarded to two UK firms, Joy Mining and Long Airdox.

• Several British companies, including Bechtel UK, are participating in Haldia Petrochemicals.

Besides these, Lord Paul also informed that UK is "working closely" with the West Bengal State Electricity Board on its restructuring, particularly the separation of the generation and distribution sectors. "If the experiment goes well, it may provide a model for other state electricity boards," he said.

While suggesting that India can gain from sharing the British experience of successfully privatising the power and telecom sectors, Lord Paul warned, "Privatisation for privatisation's sake is not good enough. It will need the role of regulators. Private monopolies can be more dangerous than public sector monopolies."

The business ambassador can expect a good audience in West Bengal's ruling Marxists. •

Niranjan Dutta/Calcutta

Zeroing in

Kashmir militants adopt classical guerrilla tactics to take on the Indian Army

It's still cold and dark at 6 am on 5 December, 1997. A group of soldiers hurry off to an early-morning, counter-insurgency operation as part of their "seek-and-destroy" exercise. They take an alien route in the high and arduous mountains of Banihal. Their destination is Neel Top, a tiny hamlet in the upper, barren reaches of the Pir Panjal mountains.

About a dozen Hizbul Mujahideen rebels are camping there in the bitter cold. Two of them spot the approaching convoy from their vantage point higher up on the hills. To them, the armymen are easy, unsuspecting targets. The militants open fire, killing a major, a captain and three soldiers. Three other *jawans* are badly wounded.

The beleaguered men call for reinforcement. Additional forces rush to the village, but most of the militants manage to get away. Only two are killed in a renewed exchange of fire.

The authorities tend to believe that the group had infiltrated from the Rajouri sector and was heading either for the Kashmir valley or Doda to bolster the militants there. In recent months, they had suffered a series of reverses at the hands of the security forces.

That very day, another insurgent group engaged the security forces in a day-long encounter inside the Draba forests in Poonch. In this skirmish, two armymen and four militants were killed.

All indications suggest that the militants are shifting bases to the Rajouri and Poonch districts of the Jammu region. Earlier, their activities were confined to the Kashmir valley and parts of Doda district. But this summer, they crossed the Pir Panjal ranges and fanned out to Gool, Gulab Garh, Arnas, Ramban, Banihal, Surankote, Thana, Mundi and the mountanous parts of Poonch and Rajouri. In fact, it is believed that they have even managed to make inroads into the interiors of Udhampur district.

Senior security officials privately admit that the insurgents have grown in number, gained in strength and are operating over a much wider area than ever before. "The fact that more securitymen were killed last year than in any previous year only points to the power, prowess and commitment of the militants," says a senior officer of the Jammu and Kashmir Police.

The authorities are evasive about the exact number of such losses this year, but admit that the toll has been considerably higher compared to previous years. They also point to a rather surprising trend in which more officers are said to have died. "In every 48 hours one of our officers is getting killed," says Brigadier Jasbir Lidder. Lidder is commanding Indian Army in the strategic Uri sector.

"Our officers lead from the front," says Brigadier Ashok Kapoor, explaining the high rate of casualty among officers. "We are on the offensive. We are looking for militants. And sometimes we don't have the exact information and are caught unawares," he adds.

A section of the army top brass believes that it is the presence of foreign militants that make all the difference. They maintain that local recruitment to militant ranks have virtually stopped and foreign mercenaries are currently dominating the scene. "They are better trained and have more sophisticated weapons. They also know that they are here to die. So they fight to inflict the maximum casualty," says another army officer.

Hizbul Mujahideen militants: possess sophisticated weapons

The recovery of sophisticated arms, including the Strella SA-7 Grail missile, in Surankote and Thana Mundi areas of Rajouri and Poonch districts early last month indicates that the militants are upgrading their weaponry — a development that is deeply worrying the government and security agencies.

Defence experts say that this surface-to-air missile is capable of bringing down any aircraft flying in the range of 45 to 3,500 metres. The 4.3-foot, 3.94-inch diameter rocket has a launching weight of 9.2 kg and is known as NATO weaponry in defence parlance. The missile was originally deployed by Russia in Afghanistan and several of

them were seized by Afghan Mujahideen guerrillas fighting Russian and government troops.

Intelligence agencies here believe that Afghan warlords sneaking into the state have brought along these missiles with them. About a dozen are believed to be there in Rajouri and Poonch districts. They came to light when security forces shot dead four Harkat-ul-Ansar militants at Bafliaz in Surankote and recovered one Strella SA-7 Grail missile. Earlier, government forces had seized some anti-aircraft guns in the frontier district of Kupwara in the Kashmir valley.

But all this mop up hasn't contained the militants. In fact, in the valley, they appear to be more organised these days. Their operations have shifted from urban to rural and secluded forest areas. "The mob militancy of the past has yielded to actual guerrilla warfare," says Prof Abdul Gani Butt, chief spokesman of the All Party Hurriyat Conference.

Another "qualitative" change noticed by some observers is the militants' efforts to avoid direct confrontation with the security forces. Instead of taking them head-on, the militants are relying more on "low risk" tactics such as using grenades and IEDs to inflict the maximum damage on the military. The 31 October, 1997, car blast in Srinagar is a case in point. Though triggered in a busy commercial hub like Regal Chowk, the timing was so meticulously planned that the explosion killed army and police personnel only.

In another incident at Hanjveer, near Pattan, one armyman was killed when, on 23 November, 1997, militants set off an IED planted in a drum on the Srinagar-Baramullah highway. The same day, two soldiers were killed at Tarzoo near Sopore. In another attack, one army officer and two soldiers were killed by Hizbul Mujahideen militants at Veerinagin in south Kashmir. What is striking is that the militants did not suffer losses in these skirmishes.

The special Operation Group (SOG), a force drawn from the ranks of Jammu and Kashmir Police, recovered an incriminating diary from a slain Afghan militant, Abdul Rahman Adil, in Doda. It contained "tips" on "how to kill" and "cause acts of sabotage". Experts say that the "tips" are tactically lethal besides being ingenious. "If used with finesse, these can prove disastrous," says a senior police officer.

Written in Urdu, the entries detailed certain chemicals that cause "slow poisoning and blindness" and were virtual manuals for making bombs from locally available material.

Security officials privately admit that the insurgents have grown in number, gained in strength and are operating over a much wider area than ever before. And that local recruitment to militant ranks have virtually stopped and foreign mercenaries are currently dominating the scene

However, not everyone is overly worried by these trends, and Lt-Gen. Krishen Pal, commander of the Srinagar-based 15 Corps, is one one of them. "It is some vested interests who are raising the din of escalating militancy," he told SUNDAY. He maintains that militancy has taken a downturn following sustained operations by the security forces. According to Lt-Gen Pal, Hizbul Mujahideen was the only group that still had some sting left. The others, including Harkat-ul-Ansar and Lashkar-e-Toiba, have only a token presence, says the officer.

But, overall, the fear is that this winter might see a rise in the sniping by militants. The rebels, presently occupying the freezing higher reaches of the Pir Panjal, might climb down to more hospitable areas to survive the cold. And a confident Lt-Gen. Pal is getting ready to 'greet' them. "We are waiting for them to come down, if at all they are there. They are sure to get killed if they do," says the army commander. •

Rashid Ahmad/Srinagar

Peace before polls

The NSCN(I-M) and the Naga intelligentsia say no to elections in Nagaland

In the troubled state of Nagaland, people want peace, not polls. Soon after the United Front government fell at the Centre on 28 November following the Congress' withdrawal of support over the Jain Commission report, the underground National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isaak-Muivah) met the state's NGO leaders, and jointly announced their opposition to the holding of elections in the state. The meeting was held early last month at the council headquarters of the NSCN(I-M)'s so-called Government of the People's Republic of Nagaland (GRPN). The insurgent group is currently negotiating peace with the Centre.

The *longwipu* or chief of the NSCN(I-M)'s armed wing, Maj Gen. V.S. Atem, 49, said that "the Nagas should go back to the stand of our fathers who had stood against the holding of elections under the Constitution of India". He added that "if the Government of India is sincere about the ongoing peace talks then there is absolutely no necessity of holding elections under the Indian Constitution".

In July, The NSCN(I-M) chose to give peace a try by opting for talks with the Centre against the backdrop of a 90-day cease-fire. The deadline expired in October, but both sides readily renewed the agreement putting hostilities on hold to facilitate the peace process. Now, however, the impending general election is proving to be an irritant.

The NSCN(I-M) maintains that the Centre should desist from holding elections in Nagaland at this juncture when the state's future is being negotiated. The NSCN(I-M) has argued that if the Government of India (GOI) thrusts the polls on the people nonetheless, it would only imply that it was holding a sham dialogue. And nearly 700 delegates — including those of the Naga Hoho or council of elders, Mothers' Association

PRADEEP PARDEK

NGO representatives at the meet (above); NSCN activists: open forum

PRADEEP PARDEK

and the Naga Students Federation among others — seem to agree. The participants came not only from Nagaland but also the Naga-dominated areas of the adjoining states. The meeting was also attended by several government officials.

The lone resolution unanimously adopted at the convention reads: "All the Hohos and the NGOs extend the fullest support and cooperation to the on-going political dialogue between the Government of India and the NSCN." But it appears that the elections could queer

PRADEEP PAREEK

V.S. Atem does not want any poll under the Indian Constitution, especially when negotiations with the Centre are on

the pitch, if their stand on the polls is not respected.

R.H. Raising, a minister in the GPRN, had argued forcefully in favour of the talks but also made it clear that they were striving for a "true and lasting peace". "We will neither purchase it out of fear, nor at the expense of our national principle, viz. the Naga Sovereignty," he pointed out. Emphasising the NSCN's commitment to the parleys, Raising said, "Political dialogue is a must because ours is a political war, not a military war," and added that they believed in a "politcal solution".

At times, he was effusive. "The Government of India has started to hold talks with the NSCN at the Prime Ministerial level. This is a landmark achievement in the Indo-Naga history, ever to be remembered by the Nagas for generations to come," he told the gathering.

But 'sovereignty' was in no way negotiable, he pointed out. "We are seeking for recognition of our sovereignty ... The wisdom of the Naga leaders lies in finding a solution without jeopardizing or betraying the national principle," he said.

The area in which the current cease-fire applies was also explained, scotching an earlier confusion and controversies. Although by 'Nagaland', the NSCN understands all places inhabited by the Nagas including parts of Manipur, it has, for "technical expediency", accepted the present state boundary for implementing the cease-fire.

But, dwelling on the Meitei apprehension of Manipur's future vivisection in the event of an Indo-Naga accord, Raising said he believed that any boundary dispute could be amicably settled "through mutual understanding and discussion without bloodshed". He hoped that the Meiteis would give up their "dogma" of Manipur's territorial integrity within the "Indian Constitution".

At the moment, however, that is a more distant problem. Of more immediate concern is the general election which Nagaland's opinion-makers seem not to welcome. And the chances are that if it is held here in violation of the people's wishes, the peace process aimed at ending the decades-old insurgency problem might just lose the people's mandate. •

Pradeep Pareek/Kohima

Hostilities on hold

The gound-rules of the cease-fire

On 12 December, the GOI and the NSCN(I-M) finalised the rules governing the cease-fire currently in force in Nagaland. Home secretary K. Padmanabhaiah represented the GOI and V.S. Atem, the NSCN(I-M). The agreement is historic: it was the first time since Independence that the GOI worked on such modalities to halt, even if temporarily, a nagging bush war. Following are some of the points aimed at keeping the guns silent in Nagaland.

- There would be no operations against the NSCN by the Indian Army, paramilitary and the police, leading to death/injury/damage or loss of property.

- Patrolling by the security forces to prevent infiltration by militants and the smuggling of arms would continue as before. But patrolling within one km of NSCN camps can be done only by informing them.

- Security forces would continue to patrol roads and protect convoys.

- Securitymen would be instructed not to wear masks during the period of the cease-fire.

- The NSCN would not stage any ambush, raid or sniping operations.

- No parading (either in groups or individually) of NSCN cadres in uniform and/or with arms in towns such as district headquarters, subdivisional headquarters, in public transport, highways and other areas as may be mutually agreed upon.

- The NSCN would not block roads and communication or disrupt economic and development activities.

- To ensure that the cease-fire wasn't abused, no sanctuary would be given to any armed group or individual by anyone.

- The NSCN is to prevent the forcible collection of money, essential supplies, and intimidation of individuals.

SAY NO TO NEEDLES

Researchers at Jadavpur University in Calcutta claim a major breakthrough in diabetes treatment

From a distance, the structure housing the faculty of life sciences and biotechnology looks just like any other dowdy building on the campus of Calcutta's Jadavpur University (JU). But there's a buzz about this building these days as diabetics gather here by the dozens. They are all eager to meet Dr Asru Kumar Sinha and anxious to benefit from his "miracle cure"

Sinha, head of the department of life sciences and biotechnology, and 11 of his students have invented a drug which promises to revolutionise diabetes treatment and give those with high blood-sugar a chance to lead a life without insulin injections

The eye of the needle is now being replaced by an innocuous 'band-aid'. Yes, all that a diabetic is required to do is stick a band-aid laced with the medicine invented by Sinha and his team. This invention — which could have far-reaching medical and commercial repercussions — is named beta-patch.

When a beta-patch is attached to the skin of a hyperglycaemia patient, the blood sugar level comes down to normal within a few hours. And what's more, it stays that way. Each patch lasts about 12 hours, after which a new patch has to be put on. The cost: a mere one rupee per patch! While insulin therapy costs nothing less than Rs 600 per month, the cost of the beta-patch method works out to an approximate Rs 60 per month

It is the simplicity of the entire procedure that makes it appear almost too good to be true. But the cynical murmurs are quickly drowned by the ecstatic exclamations of those who already swear by the power of the beta-patch. Take Jagroop Singh, who has come down from Ludhiana on hearing about the beta-patch. "I have been living with the syringes for how long I don't know. When I came to see doctorsaab a couple of hours ago, my sugar level was 300 mg-per cent. And after one hour, it has come down to 160," a beaming Jagroop announces.

Many like Jagroop are only too willing to try out the patch because they believe that it is convenient, cost-effective and harmless. Sinha's lab is being hounded by hundreds of callers and flooded with thousands of letters, all demanding the patch-work cure.

Dr Asru Kumar Sinha in his laboratory: the man and his machines

PRADIP SANYAL

A beta-patch: simplicity is the key

Instead of an insulin injection, a diabetic can now use a beta-patch to lower the blood-sugar level. Each patch lasts about 12 hours and costs just Re 1

Diabetes mellitus, known from the days of Susruta and Charaka, is one of the most common diseases in the world. One out of every four people in the world suffer from this metabolic disorder.

According to diabetologists, diabetes is a heterogenous disorder characterised by hyperglycaemia (an excess of glucose in the bloodstream), resulting from either absolute or relative deficiency of insulin (a pancreatic hormone involved in the glucose metabolism). So what is needed is insulin therapy.

The drug invented by Sinha and his team eliminates the hazards of insulin therapy. Excessive insulin can lead to brain damage and can even cause death from hypoglycaemia (excessive lowering of blood sugar). Moreover, prolonged use of needles makes the blood vessels hard and difficult to puncture.

"We have invented a preparation of non-toxic common biological materials which totally eliminates the need to inject insulin to control blood sugar in both Type-I and Type-II diabetes mellitus," declares Dr Sinha.

The drug automatically switches off when the sugar load in the blood stream comes down to a normal level. And the moment sugar level starts rising, the drug is activated to bring it down again.

Sinha and his team of scholars — who have been at it for four long years — are not willing to divulge the precise medical mechanics of the beta-patch system, yet. "We have known that insulin brings down the sugar load. But intense research is going on worldwide to know how insulin works. We believe that we have made some headway in understanding this," says Sinha. Their findings were sent to *Nature*, the renowned scientific journal, in November last year.

While parrying queries about the exact nature of the 'wonder' drug, all that its inventor is willing to reveal is: "A biological messenger formed does the job (of bringing down sugar level)." So, what Sinha and Co. are doing is replicating the action of this 'biological messenger' by using a non-insulin compound.

PRADIP SANYAL

According to Sinha, the compound present in the patch "never enters the bloodstream by crossing the skin" and "works by producing a messenger on the skin". The messenger, according to Sinha, initiates a series of cascading biochemical reactions, originating from the skin tissue and ultimately regulating the activities of the beta cells (hence the name) present in the islets of Langerhans in the pancreas, which controls the level of sugar in blood.

But will the invention actually bring relief to all those hooked on to insulin? That is, quite literally, a million-dollar question. Sinha has applied for US and Indian patents.

But till now, the authorities here have shown a characteristic disinterest in, and indeed disdain for, Sinha's research work. Take, for instance, the response from the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR). When Sinha sent a proposal, asking for a grant of Rs 7.81 lakh to invent the new drug, the ICMR promptly turned it down.

Another research proposal given by Sinha, in connection with a drug that could possibly prevent what is commonly known as "heart attack", was also rejected. This time by the Government of India's department of science and technology (DST).

These proposals were turned down despite Sinha's impressive track-record in teaching and research — which includes stints at the Mount Sinai Medical Centre and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in USA. The research to develop the drug for heart ailment has already been approved by USA's National Institute of Health (NIH). Ironically, while the beta-patch has been invented without any funding from the Indian establishment, Sinha's drug for cardiac problem is now being tested in USA and Pakistan.

The level of apathy of the powers that be can be gauged from the reaction of the vice-chancellor of Jadavpur University. "I have no official intimation about the matter. So, I have asked Dr Sinha to give a detailed report," reveals Prof. Subodh Chandra Som. "In the meanwhile, I have asked him not to allow patients to crowd the centre and impede other work," he adds.

Word about the beta-patch is spreading far and wide. But the establishment is turning a deaf ear to it. So, the fate of Dr Asru K. Sinha's invention hangs in the balance. It could either be labelled a major breakthrough or a great hoax. But for the moment, why not let the people who are benefiting from beta-patch decide? •

Sourabh Sen and Jayanta Basu/Calcutta

Down, but not out

Film directors failing to qualify for screenings at IFFI '98, look for alternative avenues

Prema Karanth is a very angry woman these days. With good reason.

She had convinced the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) to financially back her venture and put three years of hard work into the film. *Bandh Jharokhe* pleased the critics but failed to find favour with the selection board of the International Film Festival of India (IFFI). It was excluded from the prestigious panorama section of the IFFI which begins on 10 January at Delhi. "I just cannot understand how this has come to pass," says Karanth, still trying to figure out why she got left out.

Indeed, for a director who has won 12 national and international awards, failing to qualify for the panorama section in one's own country can be quite bewildering.

In *Bandh Jharokhe*, Karanth shows the emergence of self-realisation in a woman in a stark and highly-innovative style. Based on Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the film is about Sarita, a successful doctor from Bombay who comes to the peaceful environs of her father's house in Dharwar. It is there that she comes to terms with the ghosts of her past and the trauma of a broken marriage.

Karanth's work happens to be one of the "five very good" films made by women directors which were shortlisted but did not make it in the final selection. Kalpana Lajmi's *Darmiyan* and Sai Paranjpye's *Saaz* are among the other notable exclusions. Although these films attracted critical attention for dealing with themes previously untouched in Indian cinema (*Darmiyan* is about the relationship shared by a fading filmstar and her hermaphrodite son. *Saaz* explores what professional rivalry can do to the emotional association between singing sisters.), the 13-member jury on the selection panel felt differently. Noted Malayalam litterateur M.T. Vasudevan Nair, who headed the jury, said these films were not worthy of being showcased as representatives of good Indian cinema.

Prema Karanth: lobbying for organising a parallel festival

The overall quality of the films produced in '97, the jury said, were rather dismal. Therefore it decided to choose only 13 instead of the customary 21 for the panorama section.

G.V. Iyer, acclaimed film director

and member of the jury, says the basic guideline for selecting films for the panorama is that they should depict Indian values. According to him, Karanth's *Bandh Jharokhe* got left out because of the selection process and the composition of the jury.

Normally, the jury is divided into three teams and they view about 15 films each. The final selection is made by casting of votes after all the members

A still from *Bandh Jharokhe*: the story of a woman coming to terms with her broken marriage

view all the shortlisted films. There are chances that some good films would get the short shrift in the earlier round if the composition of the jury is not sound enough.

"The jury this year had far too many film critics," says Iyer. "While critics are good at assessing the social aspects of a film, I believe the jury should also consist of people who are technically qualified in the art of making films." It is his contention that people like music directors and cinematographers should have better representation on the panel. It is they, he feels, who can perceive better the intricacies of a film.

A recommendation on the lines of Iyer's logic has been made to reconstitute the jury for next year. Karanth couldn't agree more wholeheartedly.

That, of course, has not assuaged her. For the last few weeks, Karanth has been busy lobbying with other rejected-and-dejected filmmakers to hold a 'parallel panorama' so that their films would get to be viewed by the festival delegates.

The idea of a 'parallel panorama' is not new. Last year, for instance, Amol Palekar was cut up about his film *Dayraa* being ignored by the jury. He had roped in other disgruntled directors such as Gulzar whose *Maachis* also failed to make the grade to hold a 'parallel

Sai Paranjpye: appeared reluctant to challenge the government's decision

Kalpana Lajmi: feels a separate movement to hold a parallel festival will evolve soon

panorama' during the IFFI in Trivandrum.

But for Karanth, the going hasn't been all that easy. Paranjpye, for one, appeared reluctant to challenge the government's decision, especially with her being the chairperson of the Children's Film Society.

As for Lajmi, she is in the midst of a bigger problem. Her producer R.V. Pandit has been publicly accusing Lajmi of siphoning money. Lajmi, in turn, has charged Pandit with not giving her film the kind of release she thinks it deserves. Caught as she is in this bitter battle, the director says she has no time to take part in the 'parallel panorama'. Besides, she is busy shooting her next film.

"I have neither the financial backing nor has my film been sub-titled to take part in the parallel panorama," said Lajmi, "so it would be quite useless." Lajmi, however, agrees that Karanth and other directors who feel their films have got a raw deal must ensure that their works get to be viewed by as many delegates as possible. "This keeps happening every year," says Lajmi, "a separate movement to hold a parallel festival will evolve at this rate."

For now, Lajmi is comforted by the fact that *Darmiyan* is already being screened at theatres in Delhi. It was learnt from the producer's office in Bombay that informal lobbying would be undertaken to promote the film during the festival.

Films which make it to the panorama section stand a good chance of being invited to festivals abroad by visiting delegates. But if reports are to be believed, there is a marked lack of organisation this time and not many foreign delegates are expected to show up.

"Even directors and producers of films selected for the panorama have not been officially informed even though only 15 days are left before the festival begins," points out T.S. Nagabharana, whose two films have been selected for both the panorama and the mainstream sections.

Karanth can take heart that she will not be alone. With film chambers of different states opening stalls at the festival, a number of filmmakers are planning to use them to sell their films. Kesari Harvoo is one of them.

Though his directorial venture *Bhoomigeetha* — the story of a tribe who get dislodged when a dam is constructed on their homeland — has not made it to any of the sections, he plans to be at the festival with video copies of the film. He will pass around the copies just in case any of the delegates is interested.

As for Karanth, she has an uphill task ahead. In between rushing about fixing theatres for screening *Bandh Jharokhe* and meeting delegates, she would consider it all worthwhile if her film does make the desired impact. She is convinced that she has a good product on her hands which deserves a viewing by the representatives of world cinema. •

Gauri Lankesh/Bangalore

V. GANGADHAR

Soft-pedalling

Sections of the Indian media ignore crucial, unpalatable issues regarding the BJP

Hats off to *The Hindustan Times'* cartoonist Sudhir Tailang. His front-page cartoon (*HT*, 19 December) summed up the BJP-AIADMK alliance superbly. Bride Jayalalitha indicates huge jars labelled 'scams' full of jewellery and tells bridegroom L.K. Advani, dressed up in 'Hindutva' fashion, "This is the dowry I've brought along!"

The AIADMK-BJP alliance, of course, was widely commented upon in the media. But the focus was more in the Dravidian *vis-a-vis* Hindutva ideology and how these two could come together. Jayalalitha was portrayed as a betrayer of the Dravidian cause. But most commentators forgot the fact that Jayalalitha, facing numerous court cases on corruption charges, had become the most tainted leader in public life.

The Indian media have a short memory. Only four or five years back, they reported scam after scam involving the former Tamil Nadu chief minister. Remember the media furore over the lavish wedding of Jayalalitha's foster son? How much was spent — Rs 5 crore, Rs 50 crore or Rs 500 crore? Weren't Arabian horses procured from Saudi Arabia to pull the wedding chariot? Appalled at such opulence, most Indian political leaders too had castigated Jayalalitha, and these included stalwarts from the BJP.

But not one correspondent had questioned Atal Behari Vajpayee on these issues when seeking his views on this strange alliance. Take the case of *India Today's* Prabhu Chawla and Swapan Dasgupta, whose closeness to the saffron brigade is well-known. They clearly softplayed the corruption issue while interviewing the media-declared 'future Prime Minister of India'. The questions were unbelievably 'soft'. "In the process of winning new friends, has the BJP compromised on its standing as a party 'with a difference'?" "Hasn't that led to unprincipled alliances?" and so on.

There was no 'grilling' on the slush funds of Jayalalitha, her attacks on the media when she was the CM and, of course, the 'famous' wedding! If two of India's most 'celebrated' journalists could not have asked more 'probing' questions, it only reflects the pro-BJP bias in the national media. The *India Today* journalists appear to be immensely thrilled with Vajpayee's claim that he will be a 'decisive' Prime Minister. How? Quoting poetry? Or speaking in Hindi at the United Nations?

Yet Dasgupta did have some second thoughts on the BJP's political acumen. In his regular column, he lamented that "In its desperation to prove that it does not lack a killer instinct, the BJP has clearly decided to give up all scruples and join the rest of the political class with gusto... In 1991, the BJP stole the moral thunder by recruiting scores of distinguished notables. This year, with the party nearer to power than it ever was, their quality of newcomers is distinctly unappetising. Even as Vajpayee and Advani win new allies, they must reassure the BJP's core constituency in the middle India that there is a *'Lakshman rekha'* that will not be crossed."

The soft-pedalling of such alliances

involving the BJP is disturbing. With its components of criminals, crooks and communal elements, it is only the naive in the media or those bound in spirit to the saffron brigade who could be happy at the prospect of a BJP government. Let us forget corruption and Jayalalitha. Vajpayee told *India Today* that Kashi and Mathura were not in the party's agenda. This is the worst type of double-talk because every day, the extreme Hindutva elements in the party which had a major say in the decision-making process, had clearly stated that these two items were very much on the party agenda.

Fortunately, there were some strong dissenting voices. *The Hindu*, for instance. In a hard-hitting editorial, 'An Unprincipled Alliance', the paper blasted the BJP for sacrificing basic principles for short-term gains. The alliance, argued the editorial, was a betrayal of the cardinal principles which the Dravidian movement stood for. How can the 'patriotic' BJP put up with Dr Subramaniam Swamy of the Janata Party or the 'Marumalachri' DMK and the Pattali Makkal Party which had stood by the LTTE — who had also steadfastly supported the AIADMK? In case of joint

India Today appears to be immensely thrilled with Atal Behari Vajpayee's claim that he will be a 'decisive' Prime Minister. How? Quoting poetry? Or speaking in Hindi at the United Nations?

political campaigning, will Vajpayee, Advani and company, march on waving flags and shouting slogans in praise of V. Prabhakaran and his LTTE?

It is dismaying these queries are not being raised when the media write about the BJP or question leaders like Advani, Vajpayee and Sushma Swaraj. Advani dictates his answers to the fawning media which also swallow without qualms the gush-mush dished out by Swaraj as the party spokesperson. If the Indian media, in their professional approach, were half as critical of the BJP as it were towards the Congress, they could serve the nation better.

Some of the journalists argued with conviction that Jayalalitha and Advani were made for each other. T.N. Gopalan of *The Pioneer* pointed out that Jayalalitha as an individual and a political leader will be thoroughly at home in the BJP. "She is, in fact, a standing repudiation of everything Dravidian and has never made any secret of her devout nature and beliefs in a variety of Hindu religious practices." She was always present along with friend Sasikala, at *yagnas*, encouraged her followers to roll on the floor within temples and eat rice served on mud floor and got along well with the fanatical 'Hindu Munnani' group in Tamil Nadu which never lost an opportunity to stir up communal trouble.

It was an irony of fate that such a person controlled the destiny of a 'Dravidian' party. In the days to come, who knows, in their eagerness to please Jayalalitha, we may witness scenes of Advani, Vajpayee, Murli Manohar Joshi and company, rolling on the floor as part of their obeisance to the 'Dravidian' queen. And the Indian media will hail this development! •

Soulless celebrations

Mark the 200th birth anniversary of Urdu poet Ghalib

If there was one thing that sustained Ghalib throughout his life it was his ego. He lived in penury. He belonged to a decaying feudal class, which lived more off a fantacised remembrance of how good things once were, than an acceptance of how irremediably bad they had actually become.

His one affair led to bereavement. His wife never gave birth to a child who lived. His adopted nephews died before he did. His Persian *Diwan*, of which he was very proud, never got the recognition he thought it should. His Urdu poetry, although immensely popular, played second fiddle to the appointment of Zauq as the royal tutor to the poetically-inclined Bahadur Shah Zafar, the titular Mughal 'emperor'.

But Ghalib's faith in his own genius never diminished. He lived by his ego because he believed that his best recompense was yet to be. And that would be the true recognition of his worth by future generations.

A man who could be so percipient about so many things, was hopelessly off the mark in respect to this expectation. Within two hundred years of his death, his memory has been effortlessly consigned to the rubbish heap of token remembrance, periodically invoked by people who have never read him, or cannot understand him, or, quite frankly, have no interest in him.

The primary explanation for this lies in the character of the Indian elite that inherited power after 1947. It had a colonised mind. It fought the British, while seeking to emulate the Britishers in language and culture. Much of the best in Indian culture was side-lined as a result of the neglect or indifference which was the inevitable consequence

Within 200 years of Ghalib's death, his memory has been consigned

of such a situation. Culture itself acquired a new yardstick: knowledge of English and a denial of one's own 'nativity'. India became free politically, but remained enslaved mentally.

In spite of this, in the early years after Independence, the legacy of Ghalib retained some of its potency because of the momentum of the past. For all the brown sahib affectations of the newly empowered elite, many of them had begun their education in the Urdu language, and were still not completely cut-off from the 'nativising' influences of their own culture. At least in North India, Ghalib, as the best representative of the eclectic Urdu '*tehzibyat*', remained a significant element of this native culture.

No longer. The next generation of the educated and influential self confidently drifted away from their own cultural anchorages, while aggressively seeking to become clones of the nondescript residue of western culture. For such curious cultural hybrids, Ghalib could either be forgotten, or recalled only as caricature, as some exotic symbol of *nawabi* superficiality, a mannerism, a vacuous '*tarz-e-ada*', a character in a film or a tele-serial, a means to edify a discussion on women or wine.

Why then do we commemorate his birth and death anniversaries? Is it ritual, or guilt, or habit, or bureaucratic compulsion? Or perhaps, even worse, an act of 'secularism' on the perverted logic that celebrating an Urdu poet is one more evidence of 'Hindu' tolerance. There is, indeed, a strange irony to this last motivation, because if the evolution of a composite culture is a sign of real 'Indianness', then there could be few better promoters of it than Ghalib. And, his secularism had none of the synthetic assertiveness of some of its contemporary votaries: his foremost disciple was a Hindu, and his favourite targets of ridicule were the mullahs who rarely saw Islam beyond the horizons of fossilised ritual.

Anniversaries should be celebrated when they have an organic link with popular involvement and appreciation. Otherwise the effort appears to be laboured and ritualistic, if not downright inadequate. Sometimes also ridiculous. As for instance, the advertisement in leading newspapers of Delhi by a well-known institution announcing a series of cultural programmes on the occasion of the 'centenary' of Ghalib.

The bi-centennial of Ghalib's birth anniversary cannot be commemorated, as it deserves to be, when official committees set up to mark the event have kept their programmes a carefully-guarded secret or when his legacy has been sought to be monopolised by a small group of self-anointed experts who consider any outside involvement in their insular and predictable little worlds as an unwarranted encroachment. Or if the majority of those who claim to like Urdu poetry cannot distinguish between *tukbandi* and poetry. Or, indeed, if Ghalib's home in Gali Qasim Jaan still continues to be a place where you can buy hardware or bricks.

The Kotwali where Ghalib was incarcerated when he was arrested on a gambling charge

The house in Agra where Ghalib was born

It is a metaphor of our times that Ghalib is homeless in the city where he lived, and whose culture he once epitomised. The soulless celebration of his bi-centennial should cause us to pause and think. Not because in the ultimate analysis Ghalib is important, but because no nation can come into its own if it strays so far away from an organic and living association with its own culture.

In the interim, it would only be appropriate to say with the poet:

If Ghalib continues to weep this way,
Then O people of this world,
Watch these settlements,
They will be barren one day. •

Pavan K. Varma

Joint secretary (external publicity) and spokesman minister of external affairs, Government of India, Pavan K. Varma is also the author of an authoritative work on Ghalib the poet

to the rubbish heap of token remembrance

The good Bangalorean

Mahadeva's mission in life is to give decent burials to unclaimed corpses

Mahadeva has an unusual profession. He picks up the unclaimed bodies of destitute people from the roads to give them a decent burial. "It is not a great life," grins Mahadeva, getting off the tonga he uses to transport the dead, "but it is an honest way to make a living."

It's a living which has earned him the title of *Trivikrama* (after the Vikram and *betaal* stories) and a meagre existence in the bargain. The police hand over unidentified bodies to Mahadeva with a hundred rupees for each. Of this, Mahadeva pays Rs 75 to the gravediggers in cemeteries and keeps Rs 25 for himself.

"If I get three or four bodies a day to bury, my horse ammu and my family get something to eat," says Mahadeva, matter-of-factly. "If I don't, all of us go to bed hungry." On an average, he earns less than Rs 2000 a month.

Mahadeva realises he could earn more doing some other job but asks incredulously: "Is making money the most important thing in life? I get the satisfaction of giving a decent burial to someone rejected by the entire society."

There are ways the 35-year-old can make more money even in his present job — private medical colleges are ready to give a few thousand rupees per cadaver. But Mahadeva would rather supply corpses to the government-owned, and therefore cash-strapped, Bangalore Medical College. "I can't sell dead bodies," he says, shocked at the suggestion, "it would be like selling my own mother."

It's not difficult to see why he feels so strongly about those who die alone and uncared for. Mahadeva himself was a destitute orphan until, at the age of six, an old man called Krishna took him under his wings. Krishna buried unclaimed bodies, using a pushcart. And Mahadeva wants his 13-year-old son to carry on the family trade because, "This is a humbling experience and an altruistic job no one else is willing to do."

In the last 25 years, Mahadeva has given more than 36,880 unclaimed bodies a decent farewell. Today, he and his white-coloured tonga which has the words 'No help by government' prominently displayed on its side are well-known in Bangalore, courtesy the local newspapers. "Earlier, people used to call me a *thoti* (the picker of night soil)," he smiles, "but now since they know about my work, I get appreciated."

The appreciation was most felt when Bangaloreans pooled in Rs 50,000 and donated the amount to him. Mahadeva spent Rs 10,000 on buying his horse ammu since the earlier one had died and has kept the remainder in a fixed deposit for his son.

Considering Mahadeva's line of work, it is no surprise that he should have interesting tales to relate. He remembers carrying Sivarasan, the man who had a hand in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, to his resting place. "It was really funny, my tonga had police escort in front and behind."

His most macabre experience happened the day he could not find men to dig enough graves and so buried a girl and two men in a single pit. "I suffered nightmares for a week," he says, "I used to dream of two naked men chasing a girl. Then I realised my mistake, exhumed the girl's body and buried her separately. I have never done such a thing again."

So used to death, Mahadeva thinks nothing about wearing the clothes of dead men who he buries in pieces of sacking cloth. "What is for certain between life and death," he asks philosophically, "but a ditch five feet deep and six feet long?"

Well, there is one thing certain as long as Mahadeva is around. Any person dying a miserable, forsaken, lonely death in Bangalore will get a decent burial — one that befits the dignity of a human being. For, no matter where he belonged to in life or what might have caused his death, Mahadeva will be there beside him with a prayer on his lips as he says the last goodbye. •

"This is a humbling experience and an altruistic job no one else is willing to do," says Mahadeva who wants his 13-year-old son to carry on with the work after him

Gauri Lankesh/Bangalore

First it was Sridevi who claimed to be terrorised by a hate campaign launched against her by Mona Kapoor's mother, Sattee Shourie. And now it's Mona Kapoor's turn to play victim.

According to Mrs Boney Kapoor I, she is constantly being hounded by anonymous callers. They call her all kinds of names and accuse her of having affairs with various men. What Mona finds particularly scary is the fact that these people seem to know of all her movements and even know the numbers of her private line and mobile.

But the lady's not accusing anyone (let alone Sridevi) of being behind this campaign. All she will say is that all these calls have been traced to public phones so it is impossible to figure out who's making them.

Despite the many denials that Rishi and Neetu Kapoor have issued over the last couple of months, the rumour mills still have it that the couple are headed for a split.

Reason: Rishi has been taking out his frustrations about his failed career as a hero on Neetu, and she is fed up with having to put up with his temper tantrums.

If Rishi had any sense he would drop everything else and concentrate on making his wife happy. Surely, he realises that she is the best thing that ever happened to him.

RISHI AND NEETU KAPOOR

DIMPLE KAPADIA

Arshad Warsi has split from longtime girlfriend Maria Goretti — even though the two of them had celebrated their engagement quite recently. According to Warsi, the split didn't have anything to do with a third person (and definitely not Namrata Shirodhkar). It's just that the two of them had had a fight and never really got around to making up because of their busy schedules.

Yeah, sure, we've heard that one before.

After more than a decade of marriage, Pooja Deol has decided to assert herself. And this time when Sunny flew out to Hyderabad to shoot for a movie co-starring Raveena Tandon, Pooja, along with the kids, decided to accompany him to ensure that no impropriety occurred.

And Sunny, to his credit, played the family man par excellence, horsing around with his kids and spending time with their mother.

That should give Dimple something to sulk about. •

SUNNY DEOL

RAJASTHAN

Of grave concern

The controversy over encroachment on kabristans *in Jaipur claims six lives, hurts religious sentiments, and sparks political trouble*

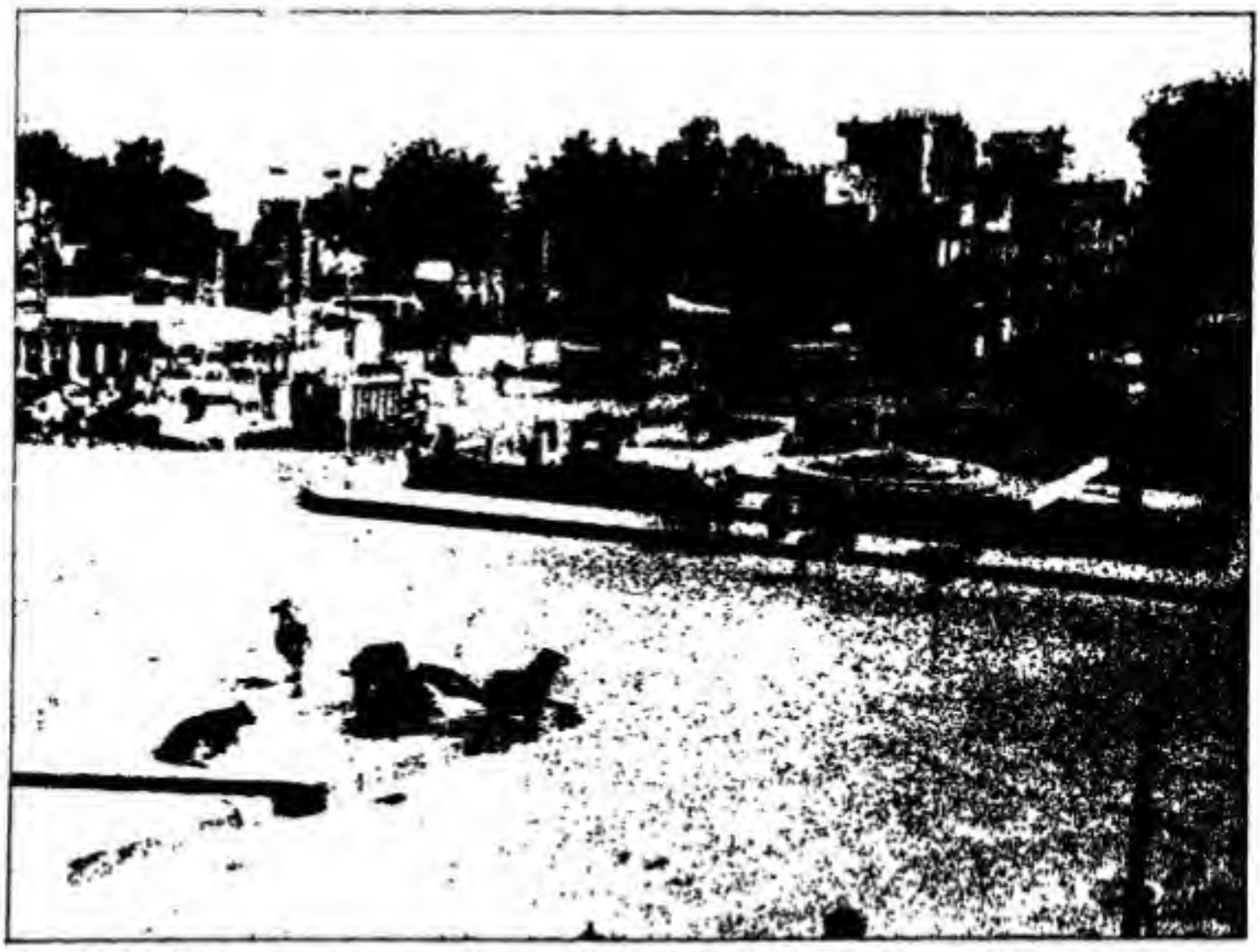
"Politicians and vultures have one thing in common: both draw sustenance from carcasses," observed an angry onlooker in Jaipur. He was reacting to yet another show of sympathy from yet another politico who had decided to stop over at the Rajasthan capital in the aftermath of the 15 December killings.

On 15 December, six persons had died after police opened fire on a violent mob in Jaipur. The matter took on a significant political hue as all those killed in this BJP-ruled state were Muslims.

Trouble had begun over the alleged encroachment on some *kabristan* lands in the Rajasthan capital. The problem was most acute in the Nahri Ka Naka Kabristan in Shastri Nagar where some 150 families have settled down. Local Muslims here alleged that a *fakir* named Anwar Shah was responsible for the encroachment. They began demanding that the *kabristan* be left alone and even formed a Kabristan Bachao Committee (KBC).

The committee served a notice to the Waqf Board and the district administration that if the illegal occupants of the *kabristan* were not ousted by 14 December, its members would then be forced to act. The administration did not attach any importance to the 'ultimatum', little realising how much the matter had hurt the sentiments of a large Muslim populace.

The Waqf Board, too, woke up to the problem only on 15 December and sent out surveyors to Shastri Nagar to ascertain the facts of the case. Anwar Shah claimed that he was not an "illegal occupant". His ancestors had settled there some 170 years ago and those who were living with him on the *kabristan* lands were all members of one family. When the surveyors tried to pursue their investigation, the 'encroachers' protested vehemently and forced the Waqf officials to beat a hasty retreat.



THE AFTERMATH: *houses destroyed in mob violence, and Jaipur under curfew*

The failure of the Waqf Board and the district administration to act, prompted the KBC to force the issue. As dusk descended on 15 December, thousands of Muslims suddenly descended on the Nahri Ka Naka Kabristan. Armed with lathis, iron-rods, knives, swords and petrol-bombs, the mob started demolishing the 'unauthorised constructions'. Arson and looting began when some members of the demolition squad went on the rampage, looting shops, setting tenements ablaze, and damaging property even outside the *kabristan* area. The 'encroachers' soon regrouped and a potentially explosive situation developed.

CRISIS-MANAGEMENT: *CM Bhairon Singh Shekhawat*

When the police tried to disperse the crowd, the mob turned on the men in uniform. Fearing a bloodbath, the police opened fire to disperse the two warring groups. Six people died in the firing. Post-mortem reports later revealed that two of the six had succumbed to pellets fired from country-made pistols being used by the mobsters.

But the killings transformed the ongoing feud between two groups of Muslims into a fight against the administration. A large number of people thronged the mortuary of the government hospital and prevented the relatives of the dead to take the bodies for burial. With religious sentiments running high, provocative speeches were delivered, triggering a fresh round of violence near the hospital. Curfew had to be clamped all over Jaipur. The Rapid Action Force (RAF) was called in to bring things under control.

The Bhairon Singh Shekhawat-led BJP government was quick to announce a judicial enquiry into the matter, an ex-gratia payment of Rs 1 lakh for the victims, and Rs 50,000 for those permanently disabled.

Once things quietened down, the procession of politicians into Jaipur began. The first one to fly in "to express solidarity" with the people and criticise the "brutality of administration" was senior Congressman Ghulam Nabi Azad. He exhorted the people not to take the bodies for burial before the state government paid up a compensation of Rs 5 lakh each for those killed and Rs 2 lakh to the injured. Other demands were also raised — including registration of criminal cases against and arrest of the district magistrate and SP; immediate removal of encroachments from *kabristan* lands and construction of a seven-foot-high compound wall all around the disputed graveyard, at government expense. After Azad came and went, AICC general secretary Madhavrao Scindia dropped by and demanded the chief minister's resignation on "moral grounds". Buta Singh followed suit.

Not to be outdone, Janata Dal civil aviation minister C.M. Ibrahim hit Jaipur with a large delegation. A peace march was staged and a Janata Dal enquiry committee consisting of Ibrahim and party general-secretaries Iqbal and Mohan Prakash, declared that the state administration was "guilty of use of excess force".

Defence minister Mulayam Singh Yadav did his bit, expressing solidarity with his "Muslim brothers". He demanded that cases under Section 302 be registered against the DM and the SP who were responsible for the "murder of six Muslims".

On 23 December, the Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid, Abdullah Bukhari, his son Nayab Imam Ahmed Bukhari, and other prominent leaders of the Muslim community visited Jaipur. Immediately after his arrival, the Shahi Imam declared that he would stage a *dharna* till all the encroachments were removed from Nahri Ka Naka Kabristan.

But just when it appeared that the fragile peace in the area would be shattered again by the visit of Abdullah Bukhari, he decided to play peacemaker. After visiting the troubled spot, the victims of the police firing, and the CM, the Shahi Imam said that he was satisfied with the action taken by the Shekhawat government. "A judicial enquiry has been ordered, compensation has been paid to the victims, and the CM has assured me that if any officer was found guilty by the enquiry commission he would be suitably punished," said the Shahi Imam.

His son, the Nayab Imam, added: "I have full faith in Bhairon Singh Shekhawat. All political parties make tall promises to the Muslims on the eve of elections but after capturing power forget them all. But there is no danger to Muslims in BJP-ruled states and we feel quite safe there. The controversy regarding the *kabristan* and the Jaipur firing should now end." After delivering such politically significant statements, and creating a sensation among the Muslims in Jaipur, the Shahi Imam and his retinue returned to Delhi.

"Death of even a single man is a painful thing," Shekhawat told SUNDAY. "But where were all those politicians who came to Jaipur when the Jehanabad massacre had taken place in Bihar? Why did Congressmen not demand action under Article 356 in Bihar, where the death toll was much higher and the government's inaction was apparent?" he demanded. "As far as the Jaipur incident was concerned, even the Shahi Imam agreed that had the police not intervened firmly, the night of 15 December would have been the bloodiest in the history of the state," concluded the chief minister. •

THE PEACEMAKER: *Shahi Imam Abdullah Bukhari*

Milap Chand Dandia/Jaipur

Cry freedom

The resentment among Bhutanese political prisoners and refugees in Bhutan, Nepal and India is rising

Various Bhutanese organisations have been expressing their annoyance over the Government of India's attitude towards the Bhutanese nationals who were forced to leave their land and seek refuge in India.

Take the case of Rongthong Kuenley Dorji, chairman of the United Front for Democracy (UFD) and the Druk National Congress (DNC) in Bhutan. Dorji has been in Tihar Jail since he was arrested in New Delhi on 21 May, 1997, and is awaiting an extradition trial.

The issue was taken up recently with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva. Ravi Nair, executive director of the Delhi-based South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre (SAHRDC), presented the case to the UNHRC and said, "SAHRDC urgently solicits international scrutiny and action on behalf of Rongthong Kuenley Dorji...Dorji is a political refugee and well-known dissident. The Indian government, in concert with the Government of Bhutan, is seeking to extradite Dorji to Bhutan on entirely spurious charges..."

According to the Indian Extradition Act of 1962, one cannot be extradited on political grounds. The SAHRDC alleges that the charges framed against Dorji are "politically motivated". "The strongest cause for suspecting political considerations as the basis of Dorji's arrest is that on 21 May, 1997, the Indian government published a fresh extradition treaty which it had drafted with the Bhutanese government in December 1996. In the new accord, the two governments agreed on a very broad-based demarcation of what constitutes an extradition offence, including, for example, 'belonging to an organisation engaging in activities declared to be unlawful... and aiding, abetting or promoting such unlawful activities or objectives of the organisation... ,' reveals Nair.

"The Prime Minister of India, who granted the approval to extradite Dorji, has refused to interfere even though prominent members of the Indian Parliament and others have pleaded for Dorji's release. This is one of many manifestations which suggests that the India government has little sympathy in Dorji's case," Nair told the UNHRC.

Human rights bodies representing Bhutanese refugees in Nepal point out that Dorji's extradition would be a blatant violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which India is a signatory. The Amnesty International, in a report, has mentioned that "while neither India, Bhutan, or Nepal has ratified the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees and its 1967 protocol, they are still bound by the principles of non-refoulment, which forbids states from sending a person to a country where he would be at risk of serious human rights violations".

The DNC and UFD had organised a peaceful non-cooperation movement in Bhutan from 20 to 23 October, demanding the institution of a constitutional monarchy with multi-party democracy in Bhutan, fundamental human rights in keeping with the universally accepted provisions of the United Nations, and the unconditional and immediate release of Dorji.

Said Thinley Penjore, the acting chairman of the UFD, "The movement comprised pasting posters, distribution of pamphlets and holding peaceful rallies. It was conducted by the activists from within the country. Postering and pamphlet distribution were carried out successfully in 13 out of 20 districts of Bhutan including the capital, Thimpu."

THE NOWHERE PEOPLE: *Bhutanese refugees in India*

In another development in Bhutan, Tek Nath Rizal, the honorary chairperson of the Appeal Movement Coordinating Council (AMCC), who has been under arrest in Bhutan for more than eight years now, commenced an indefinite fast, along with 25 other inmates, from 17 December, the National Day of Bhutan. The hunger-strikers urged the Royal Government to promote fundamental human rights in the kingdom, bring back the refugees from Nepal and India, and release all political prisoners now in Bhutanese jails.

Rizal, a veteran politician, had been charged with treason and arrested when he had appealed to the King to amend the 1985 Citizenship Act. In 1989, he went into exile in Nepal where he founded the People's Forum for Human Rights. In November that year, he was picked up by the Nepalese police and handed over to the Bhutanese authorities. He has been behind bars ever since.

"The refugees from the seven Bhutanese refugee camps in eastern Nepal are planning to send their representatives to Kathmandu to meet the Prime Minister to seek his immediate intervention, specially with regard to the release of Tek Nath Rizal," said Ratan Gazmere, secretary-general of the AMCC.

"As resentment among Bhutanese political prisoners and refugees rises, the governments of Bhutan, Nepal and India would be well-advised to take the matter seriously," feels a political observer in Thimpu. •

Ivo Gaba/Siliguri

BIHAR

Taken to task

The teachers' agitation takes a violent turn in Patna

All the song 'n dance marking the return of Laloo Prasad Yadav to active politics cannot hide the fact that the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) government has its work cut out in Bihar. The list of those disgruntled with the administrative failures of the Rabri regime is growing steadily. And heading that list today are those who are supposed to shape the destiny of the future generation: teachers.

For months, thousands of teachers in Bihar have been engaged in a war of words with the state administration. They are protesting the continued non-payment of their dues. And now, things have reached flashpoint.

On 22 December, thousands of members of the Teachers Employees Officers Joint Coordination Commitee and the Bihar State Government Servicemen Joint Morcha hit the streets of Patna. Their clarion call: *'Ghera Dalo, Dera Dalo'*. The proposed site of their siege: the Vidhan Sabha. The agitationists first gathered at the historic Gandhi Maidan and then marched towards the state Assembly.

SANJAY KUMAR

VOICES OF PROTEST: *agitating teachers in front of the Vidhan Sabha*

But the police were quick to swing into action. In order to prevent them from breaking the cordon at Hartali Chowk, on Bailey Road, the police resorted to lathis, water-cannons and tear gas. The protestors retaliated by hurling brickbats at the police. Several teachers were injured in the clashes and over a dozen had to be hospitalised.

Trouble continued the next day when hundreds of teachers and other government employees were arrested while trying to force their way into the Assembly premises. The police used water-cannons and lathis to control the agitators, and then hauled many of them away.

The strong-arm tactics of the police were roundly condemned by the victims. "They used unnecessary and excessive force. They seemed determined to teach us all a lesson," alleged Badrinath Prasad, who had come all the way from Chaibasa. Though the police maintained that only about a hundred had been arrested, Ambika Choudhry, a teacher from Nalanda, insisted that over a thousand protestors had been herded into buses waiting at the site for just this purpose.

"We will continue our *'Ghera Dalo, Dera Dalo'* campaign till our demands are met," announced S. Haider, one of the agitators, while nursing his wounds.

With the teachers vs state stand-off taking a violent turn, the failure of the administration to solve the problem has hit the headlines. On 18 November, the Teachers Employees Officers Joint Coordination Committee and the Bihar State Government Servicemen Joint Morcha (the Yogendra Gope faction) had launched an indefinite strike to press for their demands.

In a desperate bid to appease the agitationists, the government had announced that the salary of the employees would be raised to make it on par with the central pay scale, effective 1 January, 1996. Irrigation minister Jagdanand Singh, a member of the Cabinet sub-committee looking into the matter, had announced: "The facilities admissible under the central package would be provided to the state government employees." But, added Singh, "There is a limit to everything. We will not pay anything beyond the maximum." Soon after this, a section of employees, the Fourth Grade Employees Federation (Kapri faction), called off their strike.

Then, after lengthy deliberations, the Cabinet gave the agitating employees two options: if they chose to forgo their additional benefits, the central package would be implemented from 1 January, 1996; if not, the revised pay-scale would be effective from April, 1998.

But the employees rejected both the options. They demanded that besides the revised package from 1 Janu-

EXCESSIVE FORCE: *the police use water-cannons to disperse protestors*

ary '96, 10 per cent interim relief from April 1995, and an additional relief from April 1996 be given to them. Some groups wanted the April '98 cut-off to be brought forward to April '97.

Following negotiations, the Bihar State Gazetted Officers Federation announced that an agreement had been reached with the authorities and called off its strike on 5 December.

However, the indefinite strike of the Teachers Employees Officers Coordination Committee (TEOCC) continued as it stood opposed to the revised central pay-scale and the state government's pre-conditions. Lashing out at the state government for signing an agreement with the secretariat employees, the secretary of the All India Government Employees Federation, Yogendra Prasad Singh, said, "The employees had no authority to represent the interest of six lakh employees and teachers."

In order to make their presence felt, and their protests heard, the teachers then decided to hit the streets of Patna. Following the 22-23 December fracas, both the Bihar State Government and Semi-Government Servicemen Joint Front and the TEOCC have accused the authorities of "using oppressive measures" to suppress the ongoing agitation.

A Joint Front leader, Mahendra Prasad Shahi, has accused the Rabri regime of following the "divide and rule" policy. "The government wants to end this agitation, by hook or crook. It is trying to create differences between us and cause a split. But we will claim our rights, even if the struggle claims our lives," declares Shahi.

Meanwhile, the state government, despite marathon Cabinet meetings on the subject, is struggling to conjure up a formula to resolve the matter. And with the Assembly hosting heated debates on other (more pressing) political matters, no one seems particularly bothered about the fate of the agitating teachers in Bihar. •

Naved Zahir/Patna

ANDHRA PRADESH

Vote of confidence

Former CM N.B. Rao and film director D.N. Rao voice their support for the BJP

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) roster in Andhra Pradesh is fast reading like the who's who of the state's celeb. list. After film star Vijayshanti and Carnatic music maestro Dr M. Balamuralikrishna, it's now the turn of noted film director Dasari Narayan Rao and former chief minister Nadendla Bhaskar Rao to back the BJP. While both insist that they have no immediate plans of joining the BJP, they did shower praise on the party last fortnight.

A political role is nothing new for D.N. Rao. Earlier, he had done more than his bit for first NTR, and then the Congress. As a Kapu leader, Rao had helped galvanise the community against the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) after the killing of Vangaviti Mohanranga Rao at Vijayawada in 1988. This had definitely contributed to the TDP's defeat in the 1989 polls.

"I have always been wanting to fight against social injustice. Most of my films, like *Osai Ramulamma*, have depicted a struggle against inequalities in society," Rao told SUNDAY.

BLASTING THE CONGRESS: *former CM N. Bhaskar Rao*

And it is, probably, this commitment that is pushing Dasari Narayan Rao closer to the BJP. "The party has shown more responsibility than others, including the Congress," said the director. Despite being labelled 'anti-Muslim', the party has won the largest number of seats in Parliament and attracted a lot of people, he added.

One political celebrity who has been most vocal in his support of BJP rule at the Centre is former chief minister Nadendla Bhaskar Rao. "Had the President given the BJP another chance, the mid-term poll could have been avoided," he said. "There is no Congress in the state," observed N. Bhaskar Rao, who claims to be the "true founder" of the Congress(I) in Andhra in the Seventies. "Sitaram Kesri and Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy had abused and opposed Indira Gandhi then. But now they claim to be her loyal soldiers," observed the former CM.

Both N. Bhaskar Rao and D. Narayan Rao have been openly critical of the ruling TDP and the Opposition Congress in Andhra Pradesh. And their backing, when and if it comes, could prove vital to the BJP's chances of making inroads into the coastal districts of Guntur and East Godavari. Till now, the BJP had been concentrating on the Telengana and Rayalaseema districts alone. Even if the two Raos do not join the party and, instead, float their own units and align with the BJP, it will give the marginal voter a brand new choice.

The BJP, of course, has thrown its doors wide open to almost anybody of any consequence — veteran civil servants,

ex-servicemen, noted professionals from various fields, and defectors from other parties. "Nobody is pure. All the TDP, Janata Dal leaders are mostly defectors from the Congress." says state BJP president B. Dattatreya on his party's open-door policy.

"The wheel has now turned in favour of the BJP with most of the backward class leaders of the TDP coming over to us,"

POLITICAL ROLE: *film director Dasari Narayan Rao*

adds Bangaru Lakshman, vice- president of the state BJP unit.

But will N. Bhaskar Rao and D. Narayan Rao finally go the BJP way? The former chief minister still has the dubious reputation of being a "back-stabber", for the coup he had staged in 1984. "If I am the back-stabber, then what is Chandrababu Naidu. Did not Charan Singh and Chandra Shekhar, too, break their party to emerge as leaders?" he demands angrily. This 'tag' could well see him floating his own unit and then striking a deal with the BJP.

D. Narayan Rao's decision not to join the BJP could be influenced by the fact that the Telugu film industry is dominated by the ruling TDP. It is, thus, no coincidence that Vijayshanti's career graph has slumped after she jumped on to the BJP bandwagon. So, instead of falling into step with the saffron brigade, the film director could well decide to support it from the 'outside'.

That is for later. For the moment, the vote of confidence from N. Bhaskar Rao and D. Narayan Rao is good news for the BJP camp in Andhra Pradesh. •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

Discovery of India

India-specific stories find prime slots on Discovery

Discovery has begun the year the way it means to go on: a whole week of India-specific stories on prime time points to the increasing concern of the channel managers to widen its catchment area.

Its Hindi 'voiced-over' programmes may have caused ire among some (it is still a bit odd to have a Hindi track laid over something which is created in another language), but the cross-over seems to have worked in enticing many more to the channel.

A trip to Himachal Pradesh last week was an eye-opener in terms of the TV choices people have. In the big metro areas, we are used to our 30-40 channels; but in the interiors, viewers are still dependent on the number of channels their set can receive, and upon the whims of the chap who controls the cable head-end.

In most places, I caught about seven or eight, which included DD1, Zee, Zee Cinema, STAR Plus, STAR Sports, Sony and ATN. No BBC, no CNN, and no, no Discovery. But I also found that the situation is changing.

NATURAL BEAUTY: *a wildlife series on Discovery*

In Sanjauli, a fast-growing suburb on the outskirts of Shimla, the father of a full-of-beans two-year-old girl recounted how he had to hound his cable operator into giving him Discovery. Just goes to show that there is life beyond film and song. The latest figures from the people at Discovery put the number of households which receive the channel at 5 million.

That's an impressive figure, for a little over two-year-old channel.

In *India Week*, there is a superb wildlife section which showcases the mind-boggling variety of natural resources and the animals which live on the fast-depleting resources — the tiger, the Asiatic lion, the elephant and several rare birds.

Then there is a first-rate segment in *Kalaripayat*, which links the ancient martial arts of Kerala, with the dance form Kathakali, and the magical restorative powers of Ayurveda. •

SUNDAY WEEK

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 4 JANUARY, 1998

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

Someone may throw cold water on a plan you propose for developing an invention or a hobby into a paying proposition. You may have to invest much more of the family fund than you can afford at the moment. Collateral is sadly lacking. Make some diplomatic inquiries behind the scenes.

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

A journey may be in the offing. Persuade others by example or practical demonstration. Persevere with studies that will take you to the top. Look ahead with confidence. In-laws will be receptive to your views. Plans go ahead as pre-determined. Official permission for something may be refused.

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

Get a second opinion on most things before making any definite move. A lot can be done legally. Keep things under control. Understanding your rights is vital. Don't look for competition, but keep a track of your competitors. Learn about others and you'll learn about yourself. Be tactful.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

Make plans and carry them out. By being resolute you can make someone special very happy. Reassurance will count for a lot. A long journey will be exciting if you have the right companion; take him/her to see some of your favourite places.

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

Time does not wait and you may have a lot of hurdles to overcome before the week is through. Your pleasures may be few and far between. Tax officials may have it in for you. Other people's property will cause more trouble than it is worth, or so you may think. But, it may be worth more in good time.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

Be tactful. Children may get into trouble and it may cost you money to put matters right. There is no use blaming the little ones. Someone will lend you a shoulder to cry on. You'll appreciate home comforts and know where you are best looked after.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

Financial incentives may be tempting. There could be an offer for a property that seems better than usual. Things are looking up, though you may not quite grasp what is going on. The need to consider others can distract you from basic essentials and personal security. Make an investment secure.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

Money changes hands and part of a deal seems to be going fine. But there can be legal snags, so be careful. You could be too naive. An expert will give good advice. Both you and your partner need to make progress. A marriage counsellor can help.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

A secret mission can be good for your future. Something is cooking and you want to have a finger in the pie. People are interested in your potential and may wish to sponsor you, or introduce you to sponsors at some future date. Sound out the land and listen closely to professional financial advice.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

You may be put to test by a superior. Just take it on and don't flinch. Strong words or tactics can be employed to rattle your confidence. Only a firm and quiet belief in yourself can sustain you through a trying period. Look for some privacy if you are surrounded by people you don't particularly like.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

Take time out to make contacts with possible clients who are keen to have the benefit of your services. Something has got to come to surface shortly. You may feel emotionally keyed up and eager to prove your intentions in a practical way. Doing someone a service can give you a lot of pleasure.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

Mend fences. Others need your care and attention. It is pointless trying to get away with your plans and ideas. Joint participation is the message for the week. Involve loved ones in your plans. Keep in touch with those who are living away. •

RANDOM NOTES

Satna phobia

Former central minister Arjun Singh is doing his best to dissuade his supporters from saying 'Satna Chalo'.

Mainly because he doesn't want to *chalo* to Satna.

In Satna, his opponent, Sukhlal Kushwaha has been persuaded by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) to stay on with the party because he's

Arjun Singh: up against heavy odds

got the assurance that he will be fielded from there. Talks for a seat adjustment between the BSP and the Congress on an electoral alliance in Madhya Pradesh have been deadlocked. But on one, there is no difference of opinion — that Satna will vote the BSP.

Among the alternative seats that Arjun Singh is said to be considering are Bhopal and Hoshangabad. However, Digvijay Singh is determined to make Arjun Singh contest from Satna.

So it remains to be seen where he will fight from.

Settling a score

Sitting BJP MP from Nagpur, Banwari Lal Purohit, is not getting the party nomination again. Instead, the BJP has decided that the young Maharashtra PWD minister, Nitin Gadkari will be fielded from Nagpur. And this is the clearest indication that party general secretary Pramod Mahajan has had his way in distributing tickets from Maharashtra.

Purohit, who is a newspaper baron, and Mahajan have been having a running battle for some time, especially since Purohit (who joined the BJP only recently) published some articles involving Mahajan in a land grab case, some months ago.

Since then, Purohit has been petitioning the high command but to no avail. Now, Mahajan has got his chance and has axed Purohit. Gadkari is a newcomer, who has only fought Legislative Council elections. However, this time, he's been given a chance on the grounds that he's talented enough to win a Lok Sabha seat. So Mahajan has managed to kill two birds with one stone — he's got rid of Purohit and has managed to instal Gadkari who will always be in debt to him.

HEARD IN CALCUTTA

I said I'd have the Red. And the next thing I knew was income tax chaps were all over the house.

AN HARASSED INDUSTRIALIST AT THE INCOME TAX OFFICE ON HOW HE ASKED FOR WINE, BUT GOT RAIDED INSTEAD

BAROMETER

Indian cricketers: how they are rated

↑ **Sourav Ganguly:** It's been a dream year for the elegant left-handed batsman from Calcutta — scoring runs by the hundreds and signing contracts by the hundred-thousands. He's been India's Mr Dependable in both versions of the game.

↓ **Rahul Dravid:** 'More Cricket, More Pepsi' may be his slogan. But the fact is that the great Indian batting hope is playing less and less cricket these days. Labelled a misfit for the One-Dayers and unsure of his batting position in the Tests, Mr Technique's confidence must be at an all-time low.

↓ **Sachin Tendulkar:** From boy wonder to superstar to captain of a consistently under-performing team — Sachin's come a long way. Weighed down by his lack of success as skipper, he'll just have to let his broad bat do the talking and hope for the best.

→ **Mohammad Azharuddin:** The former Indian captain really believes in doing things his way. Nearly ran himself out with his irresponsible showing in Sharjah. But is now ready to take fresh guard and play some more of his trademark wristy shots.

↑ **Ajay Jadeja:** The Indian vice-captain is riding a high. His enthusiasm on the field (matched only by his exuberance in the Kingfisher advertisement) and his sound cricketing sense have drawn praise from the two who matter: Gavaskar and Kapil. Now all that he needs are runs on the board.

↓ **Anil Kumble:** After being India's leading strike-bowler over the last couple of years, the tipple from Karnataka has been stamped by the selectors with by looking to shake off the spinner who can't bat and get back to the wicket-taking ways.

↓ **Venkatesh Prasad:** [illegible] for the Karnataka speedster. [illegible] the World Cup. He's been at the receiving end of [illegible] and has failed to [illegible] his new-ball partnership with Srinath.

Going west

Kalyan Singh is now working on western UP

Recently, he organised a rally in Mathura which attracted one lakh-strong crowd. And the subject of the rally? Named after Chaudhary Charan Singh.

If things progress the way they're headed, instead of Ajit Singh becoming the heir to the legacy of Charan Singh, it will be the BJP which will claim to be the

Kalyan Singh playing the Charan Singh card

direct descendents of Charan Singh. And who knows, Som Pal, once a friend and adviser of Ajit Singh [illegible] may contest on a BJP ticket. [illegible] Singh. [illegible] Singh doesn't join [illegible] by then, that is.

Fishy matter

Atal Behari Vajpayee's confession on his birthday, that he's particularly partial to eating fish, has sent the Sadhu Samaj into a great tizzy.

Vajpayee, a Brahmin by birth, has never hidden the fact that he likes non-vegetarian food. When he used to go campaigning in Lucknow, a special *handi* of *biryani* used to be kept aside for him, to dig into when the campaign took lunch breaks.

A.B. Vajpayee: a palate for animal protein

But the Sadhu Samaj believed, for a long time, that Vajpayee was a vegetarian in keeping with the tradition of Brahminism. A pained and anguished statement has been issued by the head Sadhu, ever since a newspaper carried the report that Vajpayee likes fish, pleading with Vajpayee to become a vegetarian forthwith.

HEARD IN NEW DELHI

So far, he's only been attending parties. He thought it would be nice to know what its like to head one.

A SUPPORTER OF NAVIN PATNAIK ON WHY HE LAUNCHED THE JANATA DAL (BIJU)

Full steam ahead

This is an election which the Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh (RSS) is working flat out to win.

The RSS is organising camps all over the country to train its Swayamsevaks in organising the voting. The RSS's might was seen in the 1980 elections when it aligned with Mrs Gandhi, disappointed at the hobnobbing between the Jan Sangh and Charan Singh, and caused the decimation of the Jan Sangh.

This time, however, it is gathering every human resource at its command to ensure the election is won by the BJP. Unlike the frenzy that accompanied elections immediately following the Rath Yatra and the Ekta Yatra, this election is going to be a cool, calculated affair. The RSS held a camp at Nagpur recently where 20,000 people were trained to organise the campaign of the BJP candidates from Maharashtra. With such powerful friends, the BJP is more confident about facing the election.

Catch-22 situation

The BJP is in a dilemma about Jalandhar.

It is now clear that Prime Minister I.K. Gujral is going to contest the Lok Sabha from Jalandhar. He has already secured the Akali Dal's support. The Akali Dal has told its electoral ally, the BJP, that it cannot back away from the assurance it has given Gujral.

The problem is that the BJP can't be seen to be supporting Gujral after all the calumny the Janata Dal has heaped on the BJP. The BJP has tried to persuade the Akali Dal to field a candidate, even if only a nominal one, against the Prime Minister. This turned out to be such an emotive issue that the ties between the BJP and the Akali Dal almost broke down.

I.K. Gujral: comfortably placed

Now the BJP has decided that whether the Akali Dal contests or not, they will set up some kind of a candidate against Gujral so that, at least, they go through the motions of opposing him. But they've reconciled to the fact that Jalandhar is one seat they're not going to win. ●

CHECK-LIST

Major dilemma political parties find themselves in

■ **The Bharatiya Janata Party:** Corruption. So what else is new. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) does a deal with Jayalalitha who is being tried in a dozen corruption cases. But the BJP is claiming that it is fighting corruption of former chief minister Laloo Prasad Yadav in Bihar.

■ **The Bharatiya Janata Party and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam:** The BJP wants to keep the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) happy, for it could be a potential ally. And has been soft on the DMK in the Jain Commission report. The DMK is taking advantage of this and Tamil Nadu chief minister M. Karunanidhi has already said that in 1986, A.B. Vajpayee attended a Tamil meet organised by him.

■ **The Congress(I) and Independents:** The Congress would like to take a stand on Independents because most of them are ex-Congressmen—like Suresh Kalmadi. But for this reason, can't outlaw them.

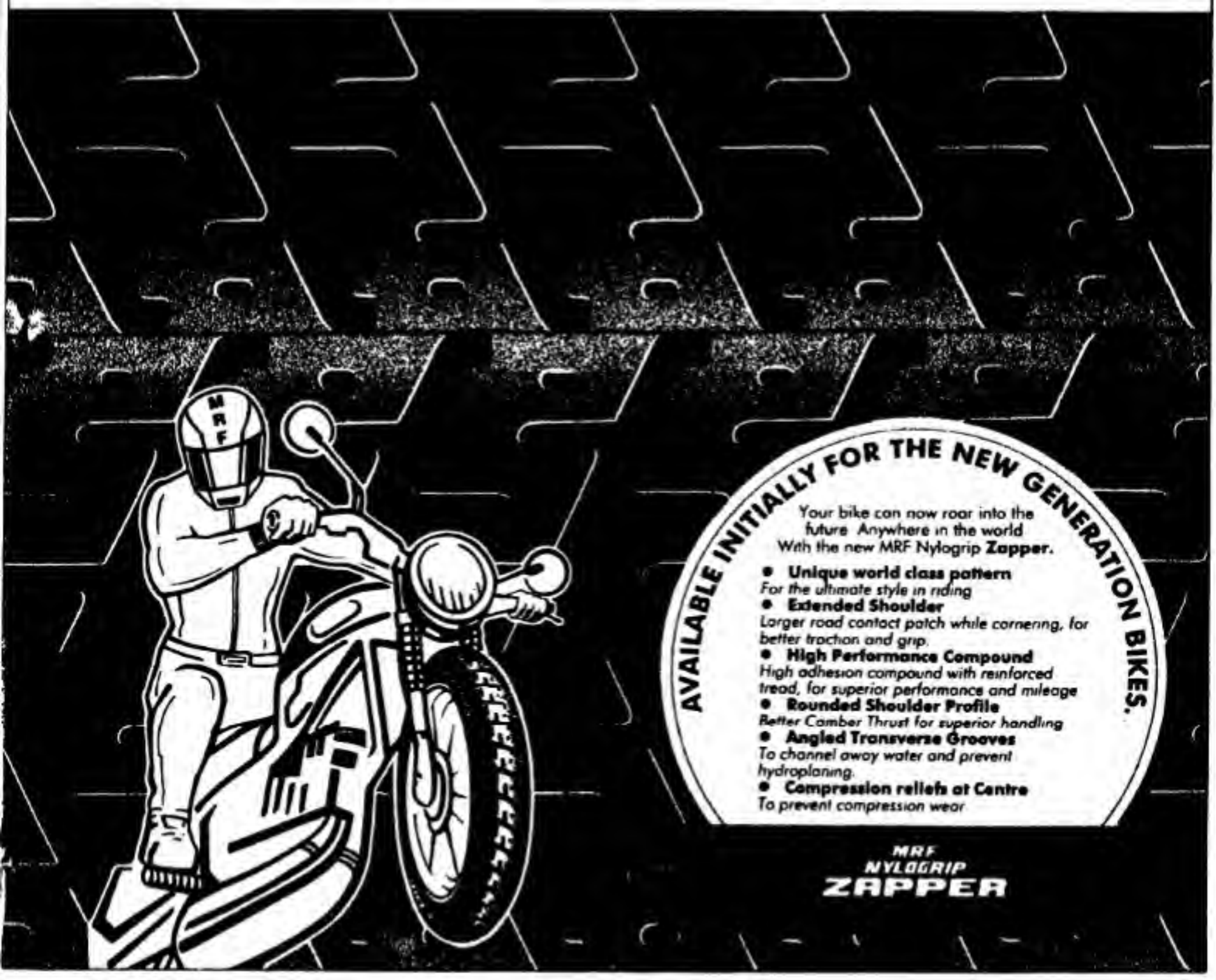
■ **The Tamil Maanila Congress and the Trinamool Congress:** How can two TMCs co-exist?

The wait is over-

PRESENTING

MRF NYLOGRIP ZAPPER

The dream ***tyre*** *of every Man and Machine.*



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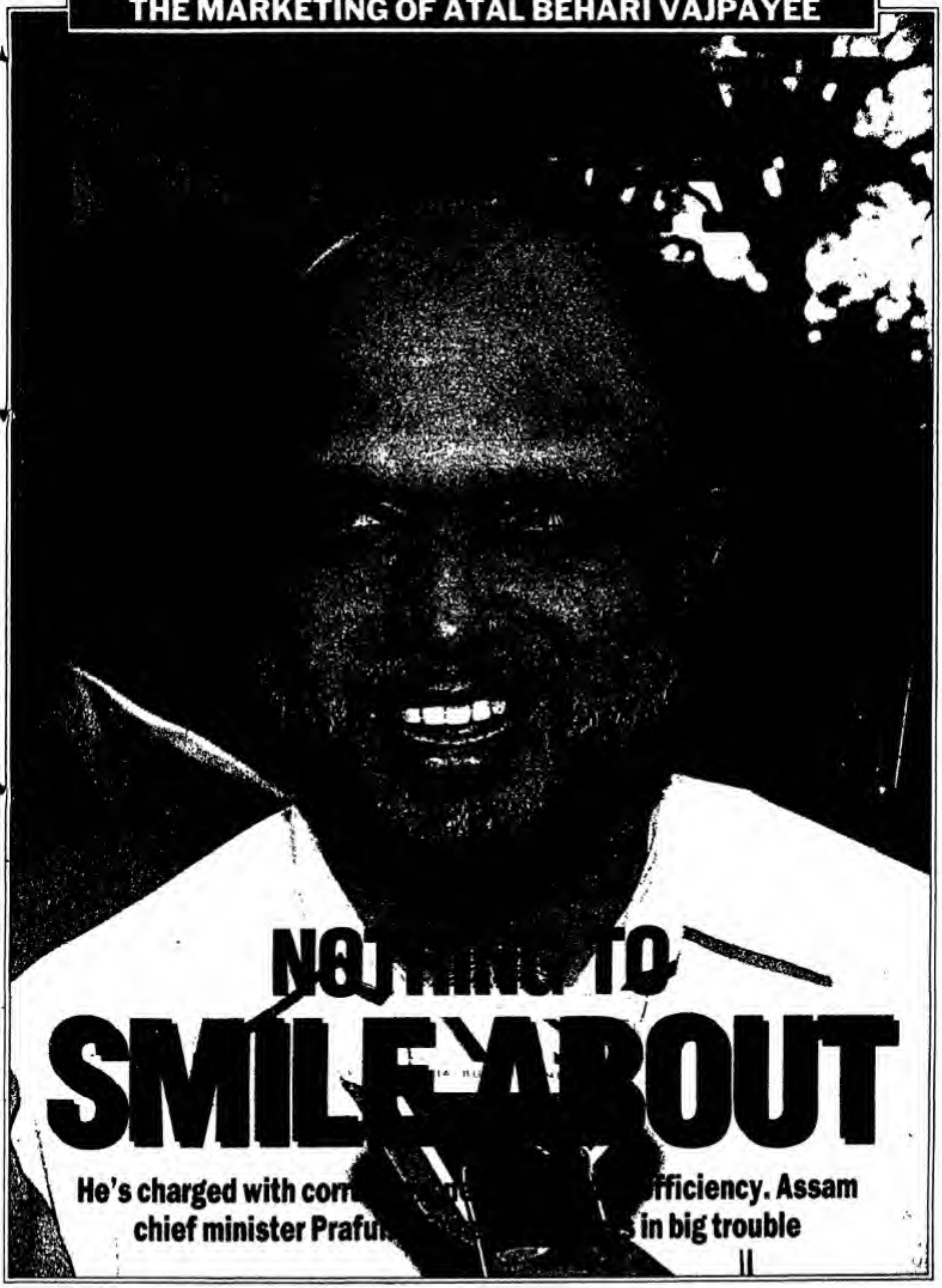

NO NEED TO SMILE ABOUT

He's charged with corr… …fficiency. Assam chief minister Prafu… …s in big trouble

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Nothing to smile about

He is charged with corruption, nepotism and inefficiency. Assam chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta is in big trouble

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Brand image

Atal Behari Vajpayee: the Bharatiya Janata Party's unique selling proposition

How the South's to be won

Your cover story *Southern comfort* (28 December 1997 — 3 January 1998) predicting increased post-poll BJP strength in the South was illuminating. With the DMK having done nothing for Tamil Nadu and Karnataka CM J.H. Patel behaving like an unconcerned alien in his own state, the BJP should have a walkover of the South.

BJP leaders: surging confidence

The Congress is already facing extinction and it will be only in the fitness of things if Sitaram Kesri presides over its demise. The best thing for the BJP, therefore, would be to go in for electoral tie-ups with Hegde and Bangarappa. And if it can dilute its Hindutva plank and make some small adjustments, there is nothing that can prevent a landslide victory for the BJP.

Dr U.S. Iyer, Bangalore (Karnataka)

■ Your cover story *Southern comfort* (28 December 1997 — 3 January 1998) was less predictive than it posed to be.

It takes little journalistic wisdom to see that with its mutually recriminating leaders, and a capricious Kesri at the helm, the Congress is a rank outsider in the race ahead for Delhi. The United Front, still unsure of whom to project as its prime ministerial candidate, is in total disarray and simply incapable of posing a realistic challenge to the BJP juggernaut.

It can, however, be self-defeating for the BJP to sacrifice its Hindutva plank, for, every Muslim vote it may earn thereby, may see ten of its traditional voters falling away. One doesn't think the BJP is contemplating any substantial dilution of its ideology. And as long as it refrains, it will be unstoppable.

Alpana Mishra, Meerut (Uttar Pradesh)

Phoney claims

Your cover story, *An issue less election* (21 — 27 December), quoted CWC member Arjun Singh as saying "the Congress has not forgotten its secular credentials". But the Congress would be well advised not to hang on its "secular credentials" for the coming Lok Sabha polls.

It is common knowledge that the Congress brand of secularism is primarily aimed at the minorities and serves as a mask for its vote-bank politics. The Congress has now aligned even with parties like the Muslim League. Is the party prepared to sever its ties with the Muslim League to prove its "secular credentials"?

Some years back, the party won the poll in Christian majority Mizoram with promises of introducing Biblical tenets of administration. Why hasn't the Congress ever thought of bringing in a Uniform Civil Code, a constitutional obligation? The "secular credentials of the Congress" are phoney and needn't be taken seriously.

Kalyani, Shirangham (Tamil Nadu)

Know thyself

In *Hands off* (21 — 27 December), Inder Malhotra has rightly pointed out that the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) has no business commenting on supposed human rights violations in Kashmir.

This atrocious resolution was passed at the behest of Pakistan. But what about the rights situation in Pakistan's own backyard? When Pakistan was created it had nearly one crore Hindus. Today Pakistan has just a few lakhs of them left. That is how Pakistan has solved its minority problem and set an example. It is like throwing stones from within a glass house.

After all, the devil should not quote from the Scriptures. In most OIC countries, human rights don't exist even as a token. In Pakistan, for example, a woman witness's testimony is treated with half the credence a male witness commands. In most OIC countries, minorities are not allowed any religious freedom and are not entitled to have their own places of worship.

Following the Ayodhya incidents, Pakistani ministers led the attack on Hindu Temples there. That Pakistan should lecture us on human rights, Chrar-e-Sharif and the Babri demolition is an irony of the highest order.

N. Prasad, New Delhi

Nation's pride

I have read your story, *The sword and the ploughshare* (7 — 13 December) with interest. India is truly proud of Dr Abdul Kalam, father of India's missile technology.

He made signal contribution to India's becoming self-reliant in defence capabilities. He has shown that Indian scientists are capable of making better defence equipment without Western help. Agni, Dr Kalam's brainchild, has amply proved that the Indian scientist can go it alone. It has a range of some 2,500 kilometers and is an effective deterrent to the Chinese and Pakistani nuclear and missile technology.

Dr Kalam will be remembered as one of the greatest scientists India has ever produced. May his tribe increase.

L. Rohini, Tiruchy (Tamil Nadu)

Hedonist CM?

This refers to your story *Nothing unofficial* (23 — 29 November). Public personalities especially hose in positions of responsibilty, must stand out as examples for people to follow. Their character and conduct must be clean and above board.

J.H. Patel: discretion, Siri

If not, they must at least hide their personal weaknesses from the public and it is in this light that Karnataka CM J.H. Patel's admissions about his weakness for women and wine should be viewed and condemned.

Candour is good, but not good enough by itself to absolve the sinner of his sins. Indeed, confessions of such kind can only accord undue legitimacy to thoughts and deeds one should be ashamed of.

S. Halan, Nilgiris (Tamil Nadu)

For a new law

This refers to your cover story, *An issue-less election* (21 —27 December). From the days of Nehru, election manifestos are just sound and fury signifying nothing. Can there be any party that has kept its pre-poll promises?

Stability, secularism, eradication of poverty, rooting out corruption have been hollow words. It's time some party put up candidates with unimpeachable integrity. As a voter, I hate to vote for any party which is neck-deep in corruption. I will be the last person to vote for the Congress, a party that has done precious little to eradicate poverty.

Anybody involved in crime and corruption but not acquitted or convicted should be treated as a criminal till his case is closed. The Constitution must be amended towards this goal. Only then can we boast of a democracy.

Rabindranath Sanyal, Calcutta (West Bengal)

Day of the chameleon

This refers to Gauri Lankesh's story *Nuisance value* (14 —20 December).

The people of Karnataka will never forget Cogentrix and the role then played by former chief minister S. Bangarappa. The 'chameleon' of Karnataka politics, Bangarappa has through past three decades always backed the winning horse. An opportunist to the core, he has hopefully forfeited the trust people once had in him.

Karnataka has given the country great leaders in the past, and it has no use for leaders like Bangarappa. Unfortunately he is still a crowd-puller and may poll enough votes to tilt the balance in favour of the Janata Dal.

Ever out to hog the limelight, Bangarappa can at best serve old wine in a new glitte-

S. Bangarappa: man of all seasons

ring bottle. One hopes people reject him outright.

Dr N.K.Satya Pal Sharma, Bangalore (Karnataka)

No more stunt

The ad war between Colgate and Pepsodent may take a *Tooth for a tooth* (14 —20 December) turn, but the war has at least produced a happy yield. Colgate's promotional free samples of paste and brush to school children, for instance, were a welcome gesture.

If nothing else, the campaign must have encouraged a healthy habit among children and cannot be dismissed as just another publicity stunt.

Multinationals and big corporate houses are not out to do charity, and if they have their fair business axes to grind, that is only understandable. It would be unrealistic to expect anything else.

A. Jacob Sahayam, Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala)

Contributed by Bratati Pradhan, Calcutta (West Bengal)

Shape of things to come

Despite absence of rhetoric from political parties, let us not be so pessimistic as to call it *An issue-less election* (21 — 27 December).

The last Lok Sabha polls bred a peculiar state of affairs. The government formed by the largest single party, the BJP, succumbed to a countrywide outcry calling it communal. It was a truly 'hung' Parliament — a paralytic of sorts dependent on others for props and crutches.

All the same, the dissolution of our 11th Lok Sabha augurs well for the country with a clear polarisation of political forces underway.

While it is unrealistic to expect that polarities and groupings will be determined solely by ideology, the redeeming aspect of the polls will be that it will, at least, let the voter know who stands where. So while it is not a happy sight to see mutually inimical political parties sharing power as strange bedfellows, that may very well be the fate of Indian polity for the foreseeable future.

Amarnath Kamat, Bombay (Maharashtra)

MILESTONES

APPOINTED: R.V.V. Ayyar as secretary in the department of culture on 27 December, 1997. He replaces B.P. Singh.

RESIGNED: Baby John, the RSP veteran and Kerala irrigation minister, from the state cabinet on 1 January.

SWORN IN: Justice Anup Deb, as the acting chief justice of the Sikkim High Court in Gangtok on 27 December, 1997.

AWARDED: Dilip Biswas, chairman, Central Pollution Control Board, the Felicitation Award instituted by the

World Environment Congress for his contribution to planning, development and environmental protection.

DIED: vocalist Saudagar Nagnath Gore in Pune on 31 December, 1997. He was 80.

APPOINTED: V.K. Agarwal as chairman, Railway Board and ex-officio principal secretary to the Government of India, in the railway ministry. He took charge on 1 January.

DIED: P.T. Bhaskara Panicker, eminent educationist and founder of the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad on 30 December, 1997. He was

SIGHT & SOUND

SUDHIR TAILANG/THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

■ I am hurt by the allegations being levelled against me. But I have no complaints. Like Gandhiji, I have shown them the other cheek

SITARAM KESRI, *Congress president, reacting to critics blaming him for the recent exodus of partymen*

■ It is like Sachin Tendulkar coming out to bat after the asking rate has reached nine per over.

A CONGRESS WORKER, *on Sonia Gandhi's decision to campaign for the Congress*

■ I have gone to the poor and rich, the intellectuals and public figures, and all of them have disappointed me.

G. R. KHAIRNAR, *who raised a controversy by pulling up the Maharashtra government for corrupt practices*

■ The Congress edifice is now falling down brick by brick. In the coming weeks, it will crash column by column.

SUSHMA SWARAJ, *BJP leader, on the recent exodus from the Congress*

■ Mr Basu is a very respectable person and if people decide that he should lead the nation, I will have no objection.

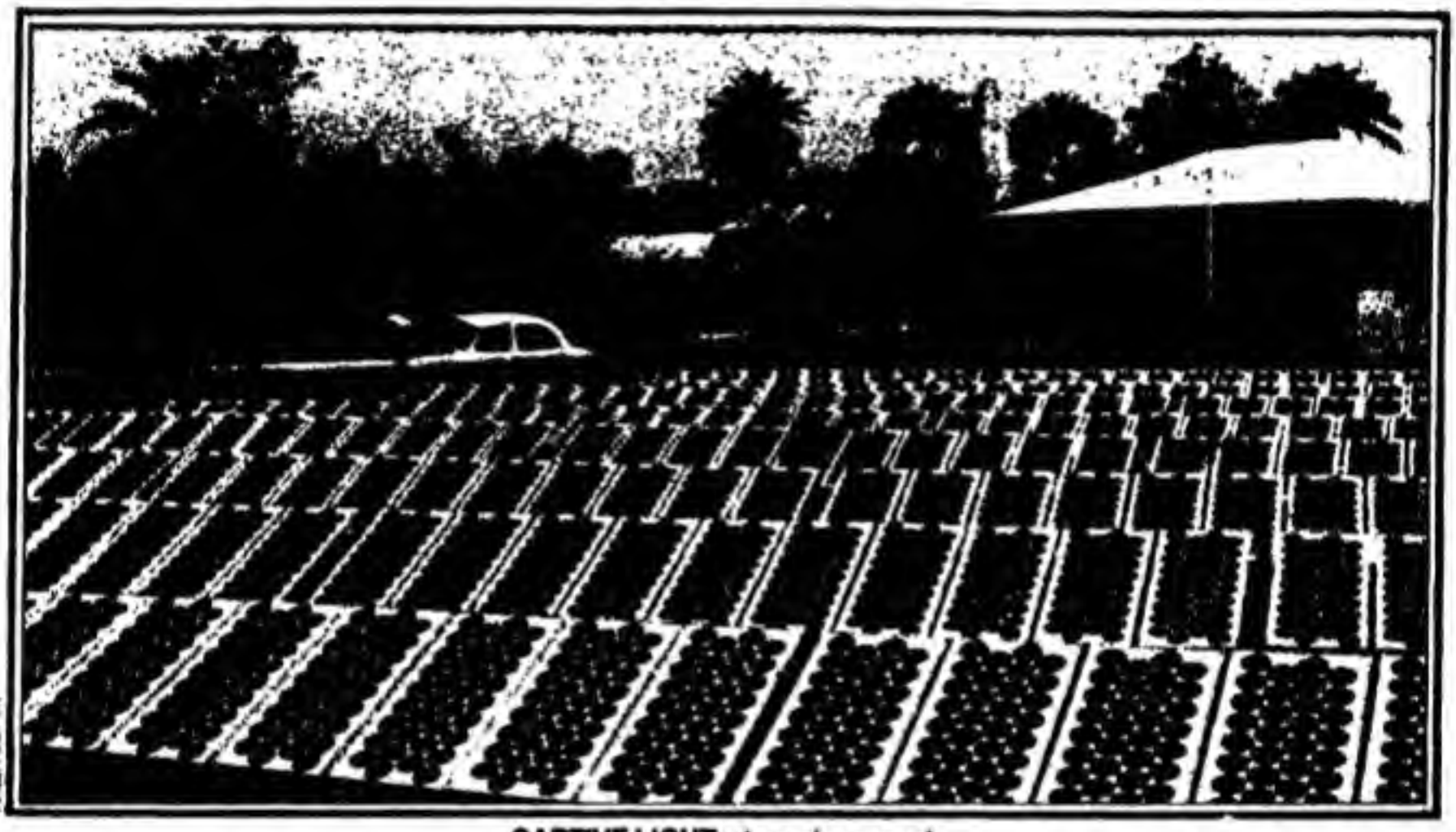
INDER GUJRAL, *in an interview to a TV channel*

■ A Hindi film heroine can't possibly have pre-marital sex.

KAJOL, *film actress*

THE APOLLONIANS

Long after sundown, Bongopalpur basks in the afterglow



ANISH GUPTA

CAPTIVE LIGHT: *the solar panels*

The sun doesn't set before ten at Bongopalpur. And life in this remote Santhal hamlet, a tiny speck on a desolate sweep of rocky landscape, is evolving to make the best of this expanded time. For millennia — maybe ever since time began — the sun had gone down each day behind a row of stark, yonder hills, ushering inky darkness through a fleeting haze of twilight. Only a changing moon and flickering stars reassured the ebon inhabitants of Bongopalpur about the persistence of light. It was an inviolable, diurnal routine — or, so the people in this hamlet, in West Bengal's Bankura district, had been taught to imagine.

But all that changed one night in November 1994, when the light of the sun lit up their humble homes and humdrum lives long after the orb of life had actually set. The sun, they were told, had been entrapped in gleaming rows of slanted panels, meticulously put together by engineers from the cities.

It was solar light — sun's light! "It was like getting the moon," said Suradhani Hembram, recalling the night-long festivity that had greeted the technological marvel.

Since then, days at Bongopalpur have grown longer, and people have adapted with alacrity to those few bonus hours. Today, the village women work till late, weaving bamboo mats and baskets, and families are thus better off. Children find studying easier on the eye, and school enrolment has risen. A solar pump draws clean underground water, and alimentary diseases are on the decline. The little hamlet has even acquired a semblance of night life with people resetting their early-to-sleep body clocks. And Manju Mandal, who married into this village, is delighted that she is able to catch up on her reading before the lights go off at ten.

This experiment is a joint venture in which the villagers, an NGO called Bankura Institute, the local panchayat, the State Electricity Board and the West Bengal Renewable Energy Development Agency are equal partners. When established, the solar station was the first of its kind in eastern India.

The 12.5-kilowatt plant lights two lamps in each of the hamlet's 78 homes, and each family pays, without fail, Rs 10 per month for the facility. The lanky maintenance man, Lambadar Mandi, is a village lad who keeps half the collection as his remuneration and the deposits rest in a local bank. As yet, there has been no case of default or defalcation.

But three years on, people are beginning to ask for more. They would now like to instal fans and TV sets. Clearly, their aspirations are soaring. And powered by the sun, the Santhals of Bongopalpur would really like to take off. •

Malobi Gupta/Bongopalpur

The sun had been entrapped in gleaming rows of slanted panels. It was like getting the moon

The individual

The first in a new series profiling the views of major political figures. This week: the BJP's **Murli Manohar Joshi**

There are two Murli Manohar Joshis. There is the fellow the press writes about. This Joshi is a hardline Hindu communalist who connived at the demolition of the Babri Masjid and who believes that Muslims have no place in free India. This man has no sense of humour, hates the media, believes that he has never been given the importance he deserves and is best remembered for an Ekta Yatra during which he tried to hoist the tricolour in Srinagar.

And then there is the real Murli Manohar Joshi. This Joshi hardly ever gets written about.He doesn't provide scintillating copy for the press and is regarded with derision by the tightly-knit saffron coterie of pro-BJP journalists. When he makes statements, they are buried on the inside pages of newspapers and when he appears on television, interviewers play to their preconceptions and try to get him to say outrageous things.

This is a shame because the second Joshi — the real thing — is a far more complex and interesting individual than the caricature of the headlines. Few people realise that his doctorate is in physics; he retired as a professor from Allahabad University and as late as last year was still contributing learned papers to academic journals.

His wit hardly ever rates a mention and yet he can be a brilliant speaker at seminars who can make his point with subtlety and humour. The famous BJP formulation, 'computer chips not potato chips' is his coinage but nobody ever gives him the credit for a phrase that the rest of his party now mouths as gospel.

Nor are his views ever highlighted. Perhaps this is deliberate. Because when Dr Joshi talks, he sounds far more reasonable and moderate than even Atal Behari Vajpayee. And unlike Vajpayee he doesn't come across as an amiable middle-of-the-roader but as a man who has thought out his world-view.

In recent years, Joshi has concentrated on economics. Much of the BJP

AJAY BAYYA

Murli Manohar Joshi is a square peg in a round hole. Not only does the genuine article bear no resemblance to the media caricature, but it is easy to see why so much of the BJP is uncomfortable with him

believes in swadeshi, at least partly because this is a song that the fat cats of Indian industry like to hear. But Joshi's conception of swadeshi is different.

He believes that over the last decade, America has come to believe that it has a right to rule the world. He produces articles from *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy* in which assorted American academics praise the virtues of theAmerican system of politics and economics and argue that the US is morally justified in imposing this system on the rest of the world.

According to Dr Joshi, this arrogance is dangerous. It will lead, he suggests to a unipolar, uni-culturalism in which American movies, American music, American fast food, American corporations and American values will dominate the globe. It is not, he says, that he is anti-American; more that hebelieves that India's very identity is in danger from such an invasion.

Did we really need Coke or Pepsi? Isn't there a danger in kowtowing to multinationals? Do we wish to bring up a rootless generation that lives for American fast food and mindless American entertainment? What would India gain from this kind of globalisation?

He concedes that much of Indian industry is inefficient. He concedes also that socialism has failed. But he does not believe that globalisation and a free market mantra are the only answers.

No democracy — especially a Third World democracy — can survive by emphasising the virtues of the market. A country like India needs to emphasise the rights of the individual if it is to guarantee any kind of social justice. But the market emphasises the rights of the rich or at best, of those with numbers on their side.

By shifting in one swift stroke from failed *sarkari* socialism to global free marketism, India will unleash so many social tensions that no democratic system will be able to cope. Hence, his prescription: move slowly and warily.

Though he is unable to say this as often as he would like in public, because of his party's stated policies, Dr Joshi believes that the key to India's success as a nation lies in its diversity. Any government — or any political party — that seeks to destroy the diversity will end up destroying India.

His argument is simple enough. Change can only come about as a consequence of consensus. Try and impose change and people will rebel. So large are the numbers that no police state can control any such rebellion. The result will be social tension of an unparalleled magnitude.

On the record, he will give the example of the Nagas who have always ruled themselves. Now, they feel that rulers in faraway Delhi are imposing a colonial structure on them. Obviously, Nagaland cannot be allowed to secede. But equally it is foolish to look for law-and-order solutions to the problem. The solution lies in letting the Nagas use their own democratic institutions, and in giving them a measure of local self-government, within the framework of the Indian Constitution.

Off the record, say his friends, he will give the example of India's Muslims. Like most educated people he believes that some kind of uniform civil code is inevitable at some stage. But he does not believe that a) it should be a Hindu code, b) that this should be imposed on the Muslims, c) that this is any kind of a priority in a country with so many other problems and d) that there is any hurry.

He has the same moderate attitude to such issues as Kashi and Mathura. He does not think that there is any parallel with the Ayodhya agitation. In that case the temple had a special significance to Hindus and Muslims were unreasonable in refusing to consider any kind of compromise. But if the BJP is to start taking this attitude with each and every mosque, then it would negate the whole rationale of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and suggest that the whole thing was about nothing more than Muslim bashing.

A BJP leader who believes that there is a tension between the values of the market and the ideals of democracy? A member of BJP's Holy Trinity who thinks that diversity is what makes India great?

Joshi sounds far more reasonable and moderate than even Atal Behari Vajpayee. And unlike Vajpayee he doesn't come across as an amiable middle-of-the-roader but as a man who has thought out his world-view

These are not views that one associates with the *sangh parivar*. Even Atal Behari Vajpayee is a moderate only in the sense that he has the same views as L.K. Advani but smiles a lot while refusing to put them into words.

In many ways, Murli Manohar Joshi is a square peg in a round hole. Not only does the genuine article bear no resemblance to the media caricature, but it is easy to see why so much of the BJP is uncomfortable with him.

His views are too individualistic for a party that sees itself as a campaign. And in many ways, they are probably too well-thought-out for his critics within the BJP to be able to effectively challenge them.

No wonder he remains a loner. •

Vir Sanghvi/New Delhi

Cabinet's confidant

Will T.S.R. Subramaniam continue as Cabinet secretary for life?

India's Cabinet secretary began the new year on a swinging note. On 1 January, 1998, he was out all day, playing golf. Normally a stickler for office hours, sometimes working late into the night, T.S.R. Subramaniam thought he deserved a break. And this one had official sanction. The Central Administrative Tribunal, no less, had told him that he should not attend office until it had decided whether the second extension to his tenure was legal or not.

Subramaniam was given three months more as Cabinet secretary after he retired on 31 December, 1997, after his last extension. The second extension was given to keep things running as the country went for an election. Also, Prime Minister I.K. Gujral felt that the incoming government had the prerogative to decide who the Cabinet secretary should be.

It took a week for CAT to decide that maybe not technically, but in spirit the Prime Minister's decision was correct. The High Court reinforced that by ordering the government to reinstate Subramaniam. However, it was only after the country's most senior bureaucrat had been left wondering for a week whether he had his job or not.

Or whether those who wanted his job would get it.

An IAS officer from the UP cadre, Subramaniam served in Delhi as textile secretary before taking over as Cabinet secretary. This was after his batchmate N. Mohanty, then industry secretary, was sent to UNIDO and as the senior most in his batch, Subramaniam awaited his turn.

There were many in the queue, but the United Front government headed by H.D. Deve Gowda scrupulously followed the seniority principle. K. Padmanabhaiah was given the charge of home, K. Sivaraman was sent to the World Bank and T.S.R. Subramaniam was appointed Cabinet secretary.

His first statement should have caused consternation but because it was such a truthful comment, everybody nodded in appreciation. Subramaniam asked the bureaucracy to do its job and to stand up to the ministers. "A bureaucrat must learn to say 'no' to politicians," he said in interviews.

He followed this up with action. Projects which had been pending for three years in the Prime Minister's Office, especially power projects, were cleared on merit. The task of empanelment of secretaries in the government, usurped by the PMO which used its power to play ducks and drakes with appointments, was restored to the civil services board.

Similarly, at a lower level, the task of appointing directors, deputy secretaries and under-secretaries was given to the ministries. These appointments would once go to the Prime Minister for approval, but now the ministries were asked to settle them at their level.

Less enthusiastic was the response to another suggestion made by Subramaniam, that state governments allow the chief secretaries and the civil services board to post and transfer bureaucrats in the state. Still Subramaniam thought this was necessary for an untainted bureaucracy.

No longer did Rashtrapati Bhavan, South Block and Race Course Road see files fly from one to the other, often with angry notes written in the margin. This was Subramaniam's signal achievement.

Subramaniam got the government to run, regardless of instability. The government gave him one extension and then another. And that's when his colleagues began wondering if he would continue as Cabinet secretary for life. Or if they would get a chance.

Yogesh Chandra, also from the UP cadre and now chairman of the Indian Trade Promotion Organisation, is the next in line to become Cabinet secretary. He will still have time before he retires, even after Subramaniam's three months are over.

The other bureaucrat who won't have any time left if Subramaniam is given another extension of three months is Mata Prasad, yet another UP-cadre IAS officer

Only the most uncharitable suggest that Prasad, who has only a month left before he retires, had something to do with the petition before CAT.

The public interest litigation before CAT was filed on the day Subramaniam retired by an advocate, K.S. Chauhan, the NBCC Workers and Employees Association, and the Post and Telegraph Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Employees Association.

That a PIL should be filed before CAT is unusual in itself. Normally CAT doesn't entertain PILs, which are fine for bringing the government to grief over functions it hasn't performed. But, can the career move of an IAS officer really affect public interest? It's debatable.

What is interesting is that P&T employees, especially those belonging to the SC/STs, should feel so strongly about the 'miscarriage of justice' and the effective denial of the Cabinet secretaryship to Prasad.

Maybe this is not so surprising. Prasad, who is from the Scheduled Castes, entered the IAS through the general quota, without availing of the reservation he would have got as a member of his community. He is too conscientious an officer to ever forward the 'upper-caste conspiracy to deny a Dalit a place in the sun' argument.

Sadly, others in India are neither as mature nor as wise. And after CAT has asked the government to 'reappoint' T.S.R. Subramaniam 'according to rules', the slur is not on the government or the Cabinet secretary, but on those who questioned his appointment in the first place. •

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Brand image

Atal Behari Vajpayee: the Bharatiya Janata Party's unique selling proposition

Take one: Atal Behari Vajpayee, the Bharatiya Janata Party's prime ministerial candidate, walks into Seesganj Gurdwara in Delhi at 7.30 a.m. on a cold winter morning. Pays his respects and leaves.

Take two: Vajpayee at his Safdarjung Road residence waving and smiling at people patiently. Offers *laddoos* to those who have gathered to meet him.

Take three: Having satisfied the unwashed masses, he now puts on his evening make-up — the role of a seasoned statesman. Meets the Sri Lankan high commissioner, bureaucrats and senior politicians. "Sir wanted to wish him happy birthday," says an official from the Sri Lankan high commission.

Background music: Strains of '....and Jeesus, our sa-aviour was born on Christmas Day...'
End of the commercial.

The day was 25 December and theoccasion— notChristmas — the birthday of Atal Behari Vajpayee. And what sounds like a promo has now become routine for the BJP. For more than being its candidate for prime ministership, Vajpayee has now become a product to be revamped and relaunched by the party.

The BJP has learnt the art of buying and selling the hard way. Last year, it failed to form the government after being in power for just 13 days. The party identified, as a reason for its failure, its inability to capitalise on its biggest asset — its human resource.

This election is a do-or-die one for the BJP. It is now set to capture power come what may. The brand image has been identified and the marketing strategy is being worked out. And at the moment the slogan is: Atal Behari — the man India awaits.

"We don't want people to feel that the BJP can reach this far and no further," says Ved Prakash Goel, the party treasurer. "Besides, we have an able leader, so what is wrong in talking about him?" he asks.

So, while it is party president Lal Krishna Advani who is at the helm of affairs, it is a beaming Vajpayee in biweekly pull-outs in national dailies, at public meetings and at crucial press conferences.

As a product in a market that craves coalitions, Vajpayee is perfect. He is part of the Hindutva brigade, yet he has managed to dissociate himself from

While it is party president Advani (far right) who is at the helm of affairs, it is a beaming Vajpayee at biweekly pull-outs in national dailies, at public meetings and at crucial press conferences

V. RAJAGOPAL

Advani's *rath yatra* politics. When the demolition of Babri Masjid took place, Vajpayee described it as a 'national shame'. BJP leaders had to let it go despite being upset about his statement.

And now the BJP figures that if it is in for a penny it might as well be in for a pound. The 'secular', 'liberal' Vajpayee factor is being played up to help forge new alliances.

Party leaders let on that Vajpayee was Narasimha Rao's candidate chosen to head a delegation to the UN Human Rights Conference to counter Pakistan on Kashmir. And just when elections are round the corner the party decided to send Vajpayee to the Gulf countries as a 'goodwill' gesture. The idea obviously was to send out the right signals to the Muslim community here in India.

V RAJAGOPAL

There are those who say this is not right. "Double standards of this kind bother me. Vajpayee is a *pukka* RSS man and yet he is projected as the soft face of Hinduism," complains a BJP general secretary.

But in the grander marketing strategy, objections of this sort are irrelevant. "Vajpayee has the stature of a statesman. He must be known not just at the national level but internationally," says Goel.

Look at his assets. Not only does he have strong oratorial skills, but he has the rare quality of knowing when to stay silent. He can charm crowds off their feet. Even a BJP-baiter like Khushwant Singh — given his tendency to write about powerful prople in the kneeling position — lately described Vajpayee as 'handsome and lovable'.

But when Kalyan Singh proved his majority on the floor of the House in UP by dubious means, Vajpayee made no statements either about Kalyan Singh or about his jumbo Cabinet. This worked for the BJP and worked even better for Vajpayee.

Vajpayee is the BJP's unique selling point. "The party is capable of projecting the liberal face of Vajpayee with the backing of RSS, but without diluting the ideology," said Pramod Mahajan, party general secretary at the national executive meeting held at Bhopal in June 1996. This was right after the BJP failed to prove majority on the floor of the House.

"We are talking about Vajpayee as a future PM so that the people who have been dealing with individual-based parties for the last 50 years begin to feel that the BJP has a distinct leader who could be PM," says Sikandar Bakht

Sceptics in the party say that the BJP is making a mistake by adopting Vajpayee to represent the party, when the BJP has had a history of opposing individual-based parties and has always emphasised collective leadership, holding itself up as a model.

However, others say that after the trauma of the Indian people when the United Front ran from pillar to post but could

FACES VS FACE

The Congress campaign emphasises collective leadership

"This time the BJP wants to put Congress president Sitaram Kesri on it's election campaign posters," says a beaming BJP worker. "The punchline will be: this is one reason why you must vote for Vajpayee (against the backdrop of Kesri's face)," he laughs.

Funny, but it's true. The Congress these days does not have a 'face', so obviously a leader with a national presence who could lead the party to elections is part of the package. "If Congressmen thought Narasimha Rao was bad, Kesri is worse," says a Congress MP. And to counter the BJP's aggressive campaign with the thrust on Vajpayee, the Congress has hired a professional public relations agency to work on its election strategy.

"The Congress will focus on collective leadership," says Dilip Cherian, consultant from Politbureau, the communications agency handling the Congress campaign. "We will project faces vis-a-vis a face," he adds.

The Congress, however, never thought in terms of 'collective leadership' till the time it had a member of the Gandhi family to lead the party. And whether it will stick to the issue of projecting collective leadership after Sonia Gandhi's nod to campaign for the party remains to be seen.

Sonia Gandhi: leading the way

Besides, the BJP has also hijacked the Congress' stability card. "The Congress has been responsible for destabilising two governments and cannot afford to talk about it," says Sushma Swaraj. "What we will try and highlight in this election are the rise in prices and neglect of the minorities and women," counters Cherian.

With die-hard Congress loyalists quitting every day, Sitaram Kesri's worry is not how to plan his campaign but keeping the party alive till elections

However, with die-hard Congress loyalists quitting the party every day, Kesri's worry right now is not how to plan his campaign but to simply keep the party alive till the elections.

not find a prime ministerial candidate, the decision to project Vajpayee as the BJP candidate is not only sound, but the right marketing strategy in the current climate.

"We are talking about Vajpayee as a future PM so that the people of our country who have been dealing with individual-based parties for the last 50 years begin to feel that the BJP has a distinct leader who could be PM," says Sikandar Bakht.

Vajpayee himself presents a picture of a man clear about the party's basic positions but a little puzzled about the alliances the party is striking, left right and centre.

At Bhubaneswar where the BJP held its plenary session recently, he was unable to explain the rationale behind the decision to tie up with Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu and yet oppose Laloo on a corruption charge. Vajpayee's confusion underscores his democratic credentials.

Less guarded was his response to the statement made by Advani that Kashi and Mathura were still on the BJP's agenda. Vajpayee's anger at the 'misquoting' of Advani was conveyed to newspaper offices in no uncertain terms. He followed this up by dismissing the Vishwa Hindu Parishad as an organisation which had nothing to do with the BJP. Hard words for the member of a party which till yesterday was in bed with the VHP.

Most politicians — of the Congress, of the United Front and even of the BJP — become more approachable before an election. They are happy to grant interviews, clarify issues, enter into debates via the press.

Vajpayee by contrast has become austere and reclusive as he nears his goal, the only concession being that his home was open to everyone who wanted to visit him on his birthday, an occasion which, all these years, he has preferred to celebrate privately.

He has become cautious to the point that some newspapers carried clarification that although he had been offered a farmhouse by land developers at Haridwar, he had thanked them but had turned down the offer. This is a new sober, serious Atal Behari Vajpayee, conscious of the need to have an image.

He uses Super Rin: *Baar baar lagatar, nayee safedi* — Super Rin! •

Anuja Pande/New Delhi

Bridging the Gulf

Vajpayee is an instant hit in Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman

A few weeks ago, a Muslim minister in I.K. Gujral's caretaker government 'organised' a visit for the ambassador of a Gulf country based in New Delhi to distant Kerala. The highlight of the ambassador's itinerary in Kerala, drawn up by the minister with great care, was a lecture on relations between India and the Gulf.

The minister knew — and the ambassador knew as well — that the so-called lecture was no more than a camouflage. Predictably, at the end of the ambassador's trip came a request from the minister: a large contribution from the ambassador's wealthy oil-exporting country for a 'deserving' Muslim cause in south India.

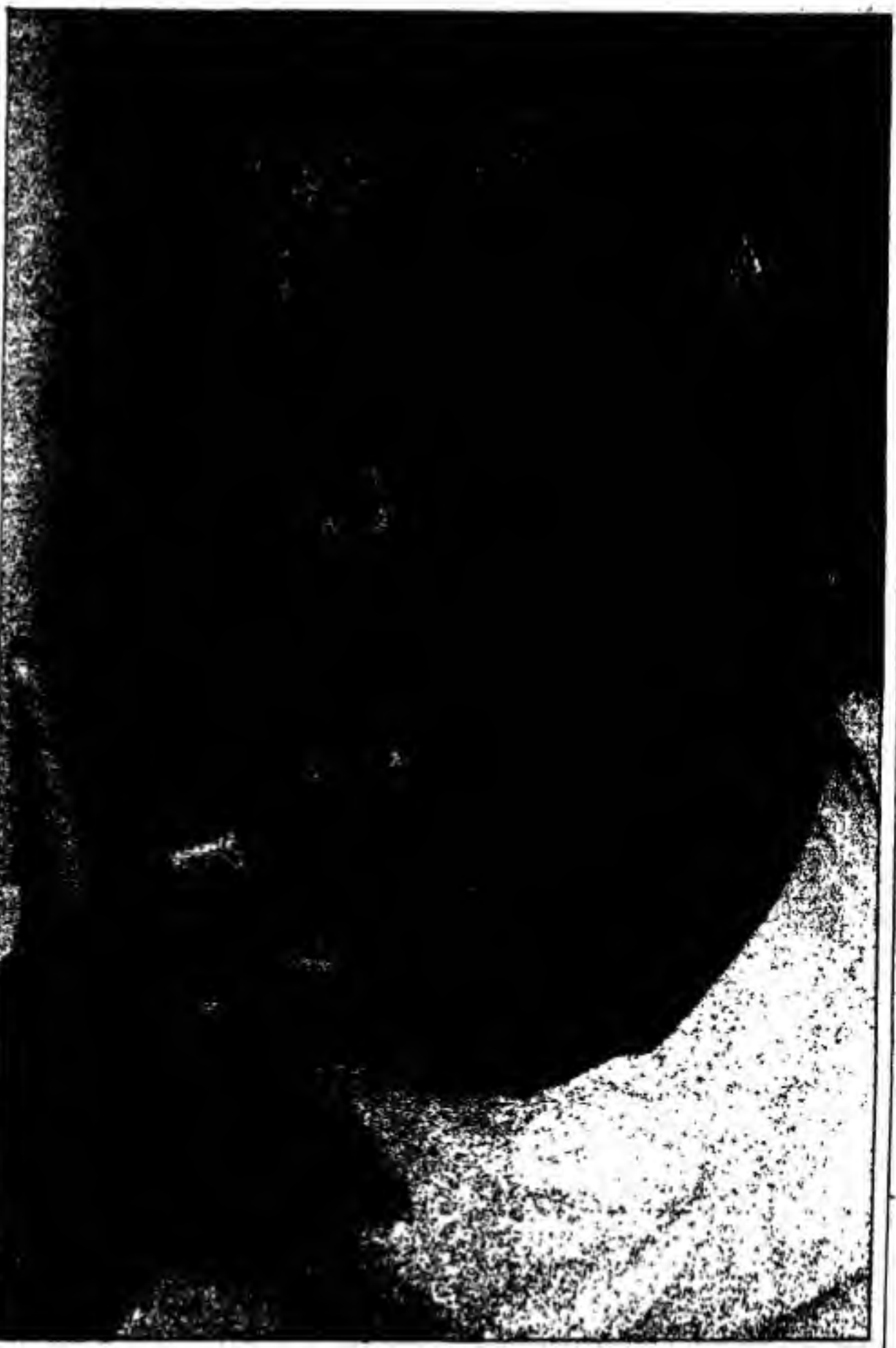
Promptly, the ambassador turned down the request. To those who knew of a long-standing nexus between Muslim political leaders in India and governments in the Gulf, the minister's request for funds — especially with elections round the corner — did not come as a surprise. The real surprise was the ambassador's firm, but polite refusal to fund the 'cause'.

Almost at the same time that the Gulf envoy was refusing the minister's entreaties, India's secular parties were debunking another event without precedent in Indo-Gulf relations: the unexpected welcome accorded to Atal Behari Vajpayee in Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman akin to that of a Prime Minister.

For those who know the Gulf Arabs and how their leaders work their way in international relations, there is a clear link between the envoy's behaviour in Kerala and the reception given to Vajpayee in three Gulf states. It marks a turning point in the Gulf countries' dealings with India as well as in the way the BJP views the Gulf.

Setting aside protocol, the Amirs of Kuwait and Bahrain received Vajpayee, a welcome that is usually reserved for visiting heads of state. The Omanis profusely regretted the absence of their head of state, Sultan Qaboos, who in turn asked his personal representative and a senior member of the ruling family to ensure that Vajpayee was received like a PM-in-waiting.

Ever since its inception, the BJP — like its predecessor Bharatiya Jana Sangh — has been wary and suspicious of the Gulf. Vajpayee was the first leader from the party to venture into the



Vajpayee: diplomatic victory

region. Even on this trip, he did not go as the party's leader but instead chose the role of chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on external affairs.

What Vajpayee and a party colleague — Rajni Patil, who represented Beed (Maharashtra) in the 11th Lok Sabha — experienced in Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman opened their eyes to the big gap between perception and reality as far as the Gulf was concerned.

In Bahrain, they were surprised to see Indians shouting *"Jai Sri Ram"* in the presence of a large police force which had been detailed to keep order at Vajpayee's public meeting. The police were unconcerned.

JAY MANGAL

As foreign minister, I.K. Gujral travelled to Kuwait during the Gulf War in an Iraqi aircraft and even urged the Indians there to cooperate with the occupation regime

In Muscat, Vajpayee was told that the Sultan of Oman had given a huge plot of land to Hindu expatriates to build a second Shiva temple. In Kuwait, Vajpayee was surprised to get a sympathetic hearing from the Amir to his request that Hindus living in the emirate should be allowed to cremate their dead instead of burying them or having them flown out to India for cremation.

For BJP's prime ministerial candidate and for the Gulf states — which are passing through critical changes — Vajpayee's visit could not have come at a better time. The rapport that the BJP leader established with the rulers in the Gulf during his meetings was instant. Belying ominous predictions of a tough line by Gulf countries towards Hindus living in the region under a BJP government, the visit will ensure a modus vivendi between India and the Gulf in case a BJP government assumes office after the election.

In Kuwait, for instance, the Speaker of the National Assembly, Ahmed Al Saadoun, decided to take on Vajpayee upfront at their meeting. Saadoun, a veteran of many battles in Kuwait to establish the Assembly's primacy over the ruling Al Sabah family, is a bit like Vajpayee himself.

As soon as Vajpayee walked into his office, Saadoun confronted him with accounts of what he and other Kuwaitis had seen on TV of the events in UP when chief minister Kalyan Singh sought a vote of confidence. Says a Kuwaiti who was present at the meeting: "Vajpayee was disarming. Instead of being defensive about UP, he told our Speaker that it was unfortunate, that it happened in Indian legislatures only rarely."

In fact, what the Gulf leaders admired most about Vajpayee was that throughout his visit, he was never defensive about India or what the Indians wanted in the Gulf.

A prominent Bahraini with close connections in the Amiri Diwan said: "The problem with most of your leaders who come to the Gulf is that they are so apologetic about everything that happens in India. They convey the impression that the Gulf countries are doing Indians a favour by employing them. The fact is that the Gulf needs Indians as much as Indians need the Gulf. But Vajpayee was different."

Others who sat in at Vajpayee's meetings in the three Gulf capitals compared the BJP leader's meetings with those that Indira Gandhi had with kings and amirs in the Gulf in the Eighties. "She was bold and forthright. She minced no words. Vajpayee was the only visitor from India since Indira Gandhi to behave that way."

There was yet another reason why Vajpayee quickly endeared himself to the Gulf Arabs. Governments there are generally wary about public meetings, but when Vajpayee addressed these at Hindu temples and at Indian organisations across the region, he called upon Indians in the Gulf to contribute both to the countries they were living in and to India.

For governments in the region, which are paranoid about Saddam Hussein, this was an exhortation that was timely and welcome. They may have forgiven India, but they still have not forgotten that during the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, I.K. Gujral, the then external affairs minister in the V.P. Singh government, had travelled to Kuwait in an aircraft provided by the invading Iraqi Air Force. What was worse, in absolute contrast to Vajpayee, Gujral had called upon the Indians living in Kuwait to cooperate with the occupation regime.

The Gulf states — particularly Kuwait — also have bitter memories of how the Palestinians, who made up the majority of non-Kuwaitis in the emirate at that time, had sided with the Iraqi invaders, biting the Kuwaiti hands that fed them as refugees from Palestine.

Most governments in the region see in Vajpayee's call to the Indians there to divide their contribution between their motherland and their countries of adoption an assurance that under a BJP government in New Delhi, Hindus in the Gulf will never act as a fifth column unlike the Palestinians during the Kuwaiti crisis.

Hindus account for a large percentage of the three million Indian expatriates in the Gulf and their role under a BJP government has clearly been a worry for the rulers in the region. With Vajpayee's implied assurance of cooperation by Indians, it was perhaps not surprising that the Amir of Kuwait was sympathetic to Vajpayee's request for a Hindu crematorium in the emirate. •

K.P. Nayar/Kuwait

LTTE guerrillas

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

The Jain Commission report raises uncomfortable questions about the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord and the reasons for signing it

He wishes he had gumboots to escape leeches knowing he couldn't jump with them on and winces remembering those bamboo jungles of Jaffna when raiding a hilltop Tamil Tiger hideout from below a ricochetting bullet split his spine sideways immobilising him for two years.

Summers he likes because the pain girdling his lower spine for nine years now subsides with nightly two Brufen 600 mg tablets but winters keep him in bed for ten days in a month. This year's 11 degree Celsius Delhi cold has absented him from his chauffeuring work longer.

He is with the hurt talking to you hands compressed about his waist shoulders squared and later, elsewhere, he cannot overcome his paratrooper instinct opening the door of the car in motion and disappearing.

Ex-Naik Babu Singh Thaka was one of nearly 400 commandos of elite 1st, 3rd, 5th and 7th para formations flown out of Agra in a IL-76 and four AN-32 aircraft in evening darkness on 18 October 1987, via Madras to Jaffna's Pallaly airfield on a mission in which more than 40 of them perished that till today he remains unconvinced of.

"Humme yeh batlaya gaya ki shanti sena ki madat karna hai (we were told we had to help the Indian Peace-Keeping Force)," he says, wringing his hands. *"Yeh bhi kaha gaya ki LTTE*

J.N.Dixit, who was our high commissioner in Sri Lanka, says in his new book, *Assignment Colombo*, that the IPKF operations were botched up from start

The IPKF preparing to leave for Sri Lanka

"Pregnant with dangerous

L.K. Advani on the Jain Commission report, the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord and more

SUNDAY: Justice Jain has held Tamils guilty of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. Do you subscribe to this?

L.K. Advani: I think it is unfortunate that a judicial commission should have made observations of this kind in respect of a linguistic group, a group whose position in the nation's affairs has always been remarkable and unique. As our party immediately commented when we saw these observations. This is a totally injudicious remark and when it comes from a judge, it becomes pregnant with dangerous potential.

Our party spokesman therefore urged Justice Jain to drop all these observations from his final report That is the least we can do to make amends for his indiscretion.

Q: But is that enough?

A: It has serious implications. I do not know if in the past any commission has ommitted or gone back on its interim report.

Q: But is there lasting damage done with the report?

A: I don't think it has done any lasting damage. But if, on this account, the United Front (UF) had dropped the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) — which it tried to do — and only when it failed did it take up a moral posture, otherwise those that matter in the UF — the leftists are those who matter most — suggested that the DMK step down from government and support the regime from outside as the Marxists are doing.

They started hard to persuade the DMK to quit voluntarily in order to save the government and avert elections.

"I think it is unfortunate that a judicial commission should have made observations of this kind in respect of a linguistic group, a group whose position in the nation's affairs has always been remarkable and unique"

But evidently the DMK felt that their volunteering to step down would be no sacrifice. It would be acceptance of quit and so they refused to oblige the Marxists.

Q: If the DMK ministers had been dropped, would there have been resurgence of the old kind of Tamil nationalism?

A: It is in the realm of possibility. It cannot be ruled out.

Q: Do you see in the Congress party's faint disapproval of Justice Jain's observations against Tamils a reflection of an internal north-south divide? Or has the Jain report as a whole become an instrument for certain northern Indian Congressmen to settle scores with such "southern" Indian politicians like Narasimha Rao blamed for decimating them politically and the party as such in the northern belt?

A: I don't think there is any such north-south divide in the matter. It was a problem precipitated primarily because of a continuing faction fight within the Congress party between Kesri's opponents and Kesri's loyal-

potential"

ists compounded by the Congress party's voluntary acceptance of the dynastic cage.

The third factor is the deathwish that seems to have gripped the Congress party, a desire to self-destruct, a desire that makes them incapable of rational thinking.

Q: The Jain Commission report has documented Indian training and arms given to Tamil militant groups. Should this have been done?

A: We were critical of the government's policy at that time. We thought it wrong. And whether it is terrorism in Punjab or terrorism in Tamil Nadu, it is the Congress party that has been its progenitor.

It is the Congress party that promoted the Bhindranwale cult. This ultimately resulted in the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi. Similarly in Tamil Nadu, it is the Congress which blessed the Bhasmasur of the LTTE.

Even in the Jain Commission's report, the indictment of the DMK is indirect. The DMK is charged with having helped and — the LTTE whose men assassinated Rajiv.

But the commission's charges against certain other individuals and sections — as for example V.P. Singh — is more direct. The BJP does not agree with these charges but it is surprising that the Congress has not made any issue out of these. And it has focussed all attention on the commission's charges against the DMK.

Q: Why did the Congress concentrate on targetting the DMK?

A: They were concerned with political advantage. If the DMK is thrown out, the UF government will crumble, and they would be given a chance to form a government. TMC would come with them. RJD was already with them. They were optimistic of Mulayam Singh Yadav going with them. It was a gross mistake.

Interviewed by N.V. Subramanian/New Delhi

(Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) humare mitre hein aur unhi ki sahayata ke liye bheja ja raha hai. Unpar fire karne ka bhi adesh nahin tha jab tak weh fire na karen yah girifturi se bachne ki koshish karen. Hum to jung ke liye maansic roop se tayyar hi nahin the (We were also told that the LTTE were our friends who we were going to help. We had ordered not to fire on them unless they fired first or resisted arrest. We were not mentally prepared for war)."

But it was there. Small firing began as the planes landed the troops at Pallaly at three in the morning and Thaka remembers it growing and intensifying as small groups were roped down here and there from MI-8 helicopters into the dense bamboo jungles that were soon winging bullets dangerously about.

Another 170 men dropped over LTTE's stronghold of Jaffna University from low heights of 300-450 metres from AN-32s were sniped in air or on ground in the few confused seconds of ditching the parachute and taking cover or from vantage points in the built-up areas during search operations. Only in Operation Bluestar perhaps did more paratroopers die in one day of action.

"They went in blind," says a top officer of the external intelligence agency, the Research & Analysis Wing (RAW), that had "adopted" scores of Sri Lankan Tamil boys early in the ethnic conflict and armed and trained them into fighters. "Neither did the army ask nor did we provide them any intelligence on opposition. They depended on their own sources confident they could roll up the LTTE in four days."

J.N.Dixit who was our high commissioner in Sri Lanka then says in his new book, *Assignment Colombo*, that the operations were botched up from start when the LTTE intercepted radio messages of the IPKF's changed intentions on frequencies that LTTE and IPKF commanders communicated on during friendly times that were not changed.. LTTE chief Velupalli Prabhakaran and senior aides had left their refuges four clear hours before the first paratroopers came down on that clear night being "sitting ducks," as he says, for LTTE fighters lying in wait for them.

DMK chief M. Karunanidhi: In the eye of the storm

GOING WRONG

Things were beginning to go very wrong with the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord that Rajiv Gandhi had signed with President Junius Jayewardene three months before amidst riots in Colombo, a rifle-butt attack on Rajiv Gandhi during military inspection, and fears of a *putsch* in Sri Lanka. Indian forces requisitioned to prevent that and later to police Tamil-majority provinces of north and east turned from that October 1987 paradrops against those that till then had been "friends" in a bizarre march of events.

Soon, officers and men who had been with Jaswant Singh, the former finance minister, were writing him horror letters and he shudders recalling some of the details. Most troopers knew no Tamil nor English, in places they couldn't read road signs — and the Tamils understood no Hindi nor Punjabi nor Dogri. Each side was mute to the other's motives and

exaggerated ill will.

And, even while fiercely fighting the LTTE guerrillas, there was that inescapable feeling deep down among many soldiers that somewhere, somehow, they had been wronged and that they couldn't really be their "enemies". They had qualms about this battle and Dixit says so in his book.

Mounting Indian casualties meanwhile were unofficially 3,500 men by the time of IPKF's pullout in March 1990 and there was raging countrywide anger against the LTTE when its hit-team assassinated Rajiv Gandhi little more than a year later. Sri Lanka since has India's formal notice for V. Prabhakaran's deportation and the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils has mattered little to subsequent Indian governments. Dixit remains bitter about Inder Kumar Gujral's last statement in Colombo that India would never ever intervene in Sri Lanka's affairs.

Ten years later, and two months ago, that terrible chapter was reopened in spite of Inder Gujral. He was its victim when, on the basis of the interim report of the Jain Commission, the Congress party demanded ouster of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and its ministers from government and, failing in this withdrew support. Justice Jain in one line also implicates Tamils of Tamil Nadu collectively of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. This has made him into "another hateful northerner" there and the Congress party into a sort of pariah for being only faintly disapproving of him.

QUESTION TIME

Are Tamils to blame for the assassination? Or is it that, horrible and condemnable as it is, it has made us lose perspective, invent villains and a pat storyline, and freeze any genuine postmortem of preceding events?

Was, for example, the ditching of Mrs Indira Gandhi's adviser, G. Parthasarthy, and his time's policy of brokering between Sri Lankan Tamils and their government more capricious than circumstantial? What really prompted Rajiv Gandhi — saying in March 1987 in Parliament that India would not "resume its efforts to solve the ethnic crisis unless Colombo stops violence against the Tamil minority" to guarantee Tamil and LTTE good behaviour and sign an agreement with Sri Lanka on their behalf four-and-a-half months later?

Save them? Sri Lanka's Pongal' 87 war on Tamils worsened after Rajiv Gandhi's March statement. Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) politicians appealed for his help days later saying 100,000 Tamils were endangered. Helitroops at May-end were lighting drums of coal-tar with explosives and sharpnel and dropping them low over civilian areas. Food and fuel embargoes on Jaffna creating small famines, that India hinted ending in mid-March, continued till on 4 June five of its AN-32s escorted by four Mirage-2000s dropped 25 metric tonnes of food and medicines over Jaffna. Sri Lanka's military was shaken. Jaffna Tamils were relieved. Why did it take so long to act? Why wait until 4 June?

Rajiv Gandhi with J. Jayewardene : signing the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord

And, could any but the simplest ceasefire arrangement hold after all this? Would any machine-gunned, mortared, bombarded, starved people forget all and forgive those that did this in two months? And yet, in less than that time, an accord was signed. Who wanted it? Prabhakaran, says Dixit unhesitatingly. Yes?

TRAPPED

He writes in *'Assignment'* knowing between 22—24 June of LTTE men in Singapore telling a Madras newspaper editor of Prabhakaran's willingness for compromise. Hardeep Puri, who was our high commission's first secretary (political), met him thrice in his Jaffna hideout and once in Delhi's Ashok Hotel over July '87 and his report to the foreign office Justice Jain embarrassingly publicised shows Prabhakaran demanding Eelam after every exhausting round of negotiations.

He is like that in Ashok Hotel days and hours before the agreement is signed. He wants to be back in Jaffna. Tamil Nadu's chief minister M.G. Ramachandran is flown in to calm him. The Cabinet Commitee of Political Affairs (CCPA) chaired by Rajiv Gandhi decides to go ahead with the accord in spite of Prabhakaran. Logic: "The decision," writes Dixit, "was that with the endorsement of the agreement by the Tamil Nadu government the Centre should not be obstructed by Tamil militant groups in bringing peace and normalcy to Sri Lanka."

And if the LTTE bucked? Then army chief K. Sundarji is quoted saying he "would be able to neutralise them militarily within two weeks"! Prabhakaran is returned to Jaffna five days after the accord. Addressing a public meeting in Sudumalai Temple grounds he says he was pressured to acccept it and won't give up Eelam. So did Prabhakaran really want the accord?

Did Jayewardene? *'Assignment'* reveals he was shaky, asking Dixit to convince his Cabinet of it, and sought two weeks postponement to build public support. Rajiv Gandhi agreed to delay

coming by three days to sign the accord. Even two days before that, Jayewardene was unsure. "...Ultimately," reveals Dixit, "he decided to sign the agreement only because he was given clear indications that if he did not...India would totally pull back from its mediatory role and that the general support of India, particularly the Tamil Nadu public, would be available to the LTTE and Sri Lankan Tamils." A threat to rearm LTTE?

Back in Delhi, Prabhakaran is leper after being made representative of Sri Lankan Tamils (Who sanctioned this?) and then, because he baulks, being sub-

Rajiv Gandhi's assassination: a brutal end

stituted for by the Tamil Nadu government. In Colombo he is our bazooka. Who were we pitching for? Sri Lankan Tamils? Sinhalese? Ourselves? Why on earth did we want a treaty few seemed to want?

AMERICA! AMERICA!

To stop Americans, too, you hear. Was there inside information they were stepping in, taking over, Grenada Sri Lanka? Or was this manufactured scare? They barely protested the 4 June food-drop that put out America-friendly Sri Lanka's war against America-unfriendly LTTE in the north and east. Why?

And why were Americans first with congratulations for the accord after their ambassador in Colombo, James Spain, knew that its secret portion (letters Rajiv Gandhi and Jayewardene exchanged) demilitarised a proposed Voice of America facility and limited their marines' use of Trincomalee port? Been these protected? Didn't these matter?

Why, again, would "unfriendly" America support an "unfriendly" agreement between a "friendly" country (Jayewardene's Sri Lanka) and an "unfriendly" one (Rajiv Gandhi's India)? why did they bear with its anti-Americanism? Playing along, were they? Who for? India? Rajiv Gandhi? Why?

Dixit now says "America had no stakes in serving Sri Lanka's interests."

From the beginning, things were very wrong with the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord that Rajiv Gandhi had signed with President Junius Jayewardene three months before amidst riots in Colombo, a rifle-butt attack on Rajiv Gandhi during military inspection, and fears of a *putsch* in Sri Lanka

Would Americans have accepted its division, Cyprus-like? He says it was discussed as an option and they neither said yes nor no. They, he has you understand, left it pretty much to India to decide. Jayewardene told Sayeed Naqvi, the journalist, in August 1987, also, "The United States considers India the guardian of this part of the world...America will not lift a finger to help us without first consulting India."

Why make the accord appear anti-American? Better sold here? Why exaggerate to army commanders (Rajiv Gandhi, 27 April '87) of the "growing influence" in Sri Lanka of "foreign elements hostile to India"? Why spin simple savagery (N.D.Tiwari on Jaffna bombings, 27 May) into a yarn of "the increasing influence of external elements inimical to security, stability and peace in our region? And why exhort Congressmen "to be ready to meet the destabilisation moves aimed against the country" at their parliamentary party meeting on the eve of a crucial monsoon session two days before Rajiv Gandhi signed the accord?

"I have a gnawing worry," says Jaswant Singh, in measured tones. "that the agreement was signed not really to subserve the interests of India or even of what is generally called the Tamil cause. I wish someone would do a exercise that crossmatched the unfolding of the Bofors matter with the relay of messages that went out of the then premier's office to our high commissioner in Colombo. I sincerely hope that my fears are entirely unfounded. Yet I must voice them for after all the then premier lost his life in the process."

THE RECOIL

Dixit discounts any link. Mani Shankar Aiyar rages. B.G. Deshmukh who was Rajiv Gandhi's Cabinet secretary is dismissive but T.N.Seshan, who refused an interview last fortnight, brought it up in a book of his. George Fernandes is convinced of it as are such responsible politicians as Janata Dal's Surendra Mohan and CPI's general secretary, A.B.Bardhan.

On 13 May, Swedish radio in its third broadcast confirmed $39 million had been paid in commissions in the Bofors deal. Three days later, after a threatened Opposition campaign against corruption, Rajiv Gandhi spoke of "Mir Jaffars and Jai Chands" at a Congress rally. In Colombo, Dixit was warning Sri Lan-

Even while fiercely fighting the LTTE guerrillas, there was that inescapable feeling deep down among many Indian soldiers that somewhere, somehow, they have been wronged and that they couldn't really be their "enemies"

Relief materials being flown in to Jaffna by the IPKF

kan ministers that its war in Jaffna could "hamper" relations with India.

On 4 June, the much-awaited Swedish Audit Bureau's confirmation of "considerable payments" of commissions was overshadowed by the Indian food-drop over Jaffna. "I said in Parliament then it was a diversion," insists Jaipal Reddy. "It couldn't be because it was planned only at three in the morning," says Dixit. "Our missions abroad have a knack of getting sensitive information in advance," replies A.P. Venkateswaran, another former foreign secretary.

Between 19—23 July, Singh, Arun Nehru, Arif Mohammed Khan and V.C. Shukla were expelled and the CPI, CPI(M) and RSP called for fresh elections. Next day, Opposition parties had corruption no. 1 on the agenda for the forthcoming monsoon session; Dixit was carrying concessions from Jayewardene to Rajiv Gandhi for the peace treaty; and Prabhakaran was being choppered out of Jaffna via Madras to Delhi.

On 26 July, when Kamalapati Tripathi, Swaran Singh, C. Subramanium and Sadiq Ali were condemning an earlier assault on Singh, and Singh began mudslinging, the CCPA headed by Rajiv Gandhi was going ahead with the accord without Prabhakaran's consent. A day

Inder Kumar Gujral: a victim of circumstances?

before signing it, papers of a Bofors probe were snatched from his minister's hands in Parliament, and the Opposition boycotted his meeting on the proposed accord.

Was he brave to go ahead? Or was he desperate to succeed? Would the Pongal war have been as barbarous if there had been no Bofors nor HDW scandals, no inimical V.P. Singh nor Zail Singh, no walk-outs nor uproars in Parliament, no Opposition unification nor chorus calls for fresh elections, to pre-occupy him? Would he then have acted with greater prudence? Was half his mind in Delhi and half in Colombo when he went to sign the accord? Was he half-PM? Impaired?

Dixit, who did little else but scrupulously carry out his assignment Colombo, agrees he was handicapped but charitably spreads the blame wider. It might be as honourable, whenever recalling that picture of the naval rating's attack on Rajiv Gandhi and his terrible assassination, to remember, too, the senseless destruction of many many mates of ex-Naik Babu Singh Thaka and the blaming of a community for a crime they were never guilty of. •

N.V. Subramanian/New Delhi

RAVI SHANKARAN

Jayalalitha, Advani (third from left) and other leaders at the silver jubilee convention: closing ranks

Back with a vengeance

Tirunelveli is a sleepy small town about 75 kilometers before India's southernmost tip, Kanyakumari. The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) chief and former Tamil Nadu chief minister, J. Jayalalitha, chose the place to hold her party's silver jubilee convention because the southern part of the state has been one of her traditional areas of influence.

Two weeks before the big bash, Jayalalitha created history by aligning with the BJP, which was ideologically poles apart from the Dravidian parties. More surprisingly, she could rope in V. Gopalasamy's Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), S. Ramadoss' Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), former Congressman Vazhappadi Ramamurthi and her one-time bitter enemy Subramaniam Swamy, all of whom sang hosannas to her and defended the inclusion of BJP in this front.

The AIADMK-BJP alliance has a single-point agenda: to destroy the DMK and its leader Karunanidhi

When all of them converged on the same dais in Tirunelveli on a pleasant Saturday morning, it looked like the *muharat* of a political blockbuster starring mega actors L.K. Advani and Jayalalitha along with assorted performers like Gopalasamy and Ramadoss who are little known outside Tamil Nadu but are crowd-pullers in their own state.

They themselves are not sure how long the alliance will last and make no bones about the fact that it has been cobbled together with the single objective of getting as many seats as possible out of the 39 in the state. Except for Advani, all the other leaders have their own axe to grind against the chief minister and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)

IMAGE MANAGEMENT

The silver jubilee convention at Tirunelveli was a great PR exercise

The AIADMK convention was done in style and the local media swear that the lady has changed for the better. She charmed the press and said that she would not lose her cool even if the media tried to needle her. Jayalalitha without any jewellery was looking humble and loving, a far cry from the days when she used to sit on special thrones in imperious style with Sasikala by her side.

This time, Sasikala was left behind at her Poes Garden residence and Jayalalitha dressed in a simple sari was the cynosure of all eyes. She sat on ordinary chairs, there was no larger-than-life cutouts of her and ordinary colour posters of her along with Gopalasamy or Advani were seen around. She had become more accessible to her partymen.

On the first day of the convention, Jayalalitha unveiled a statue of MGR, hoisted the party flag and inaugurated a photo exhibition on the party's history. Later, a huge procession was taken out through the main streets as Jayalalitha watched from a specially erected dais.

Though the procession to kick off the three-day extravaganza lacked the glitter of the party's earlier conventions, the massive gathering impressed everybody including Advani. Jayalalitha claimed that 35 lakh people had turned up (though police said the figure was less than two lakh) and more would have come had the administration not restricted traffic.

The AIADMK and its leader, who either used to beat up journalists or sue them for defamation, had suddenly become media-friendly. Nearly 40 pressmen were taken from Madras to Tirunelveli and well looked after.

The person responsible for this great PR exercise was R.K. Kumar, a Rajya Sabha MP and deputy leader of the AIADMK parliamentary party. A month before the convention, he had sent special invitations to all state-level and local media barring the DMK organ *Murasoli*, Sun TV and *Nakkeeran*, which tops the party's hate-list.

"I was determined to pep up the party's image in the media and I virtually functioned as the party spokesman," said Kumar. A chartered accountant, he saw to it that the entire media corps was present in the historic alliance meeting and had nothing to complain about.

Impressed by his efforts to get her a good press, Jayalalitha presented Kumar with a shawl at the function. To top it all, the AIADMK got a six-page sponsored colour supplement titled 'Blossoming of a new era' published in *The Times of India*.

Quite unheard of in the history of the Dravidian parties. ■

RAVI SHANKARAN

R.K. Kumar being honoured by Jayalalitha: media savvy

strongman, M. Karunanidhi.

There is no love lost between the alliance leaders but as a BJP functionary accompanying Advani remarked in lighter vein, "The front cobbled together by Jayalalitha is a group of men who can't stand each other but their hatred for Karunanidhi has brought them together. It is what we call a classic case of *dushman ka dushman hamara dost* kind of political scenario."

The AIADMK-BJP alliance is bound to be a major electoral plank for the DMK which has already gone hammer and tongs at Jayalalitha for having aligned with a "communal party", throwing to the winds the secular ideals, rationalism and self-respect of the Dravidian movement.

For the people of the state however, unprincipled alliance is nothing new and has a history of its own. In 1967, the DMK formed a front with partners as diverse as the Muslim League, Swatantra Party and the CPI(M) that trounced the Congress. Again in the 1971 elections, the DMK allied with the Congress.

The AIADMK headed by MGR opposed the Congress in 1980 but went all out to support it in 1984. In 1991, the

Jayalalitha-led AIADMK won in alliance with the Congress. But the same alliance was trounced in the 1996 elections when the then state Congress led by G.K. Moopanar formed the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC) and joined hands with the DMK. Similar was the case of other smaller parties riding piggyback on the two Dravidian outfits.

As well-known political commentator Cho Ramaswamy once commented, "Opportunistic alliances have always been justified by politicians of all hues on the pretext that there are no permanent friends or enemies in politics."

Only last fortnight, CPI(M) general secretary Harkishen Singh Surjeet, who is now raving and ranting about the BJP-AIADMK alliance, had no qualms to go to the Gopalapuram residence of Karunanidhi to join the DMK-TMC front after supporting Karunanidhi's *bete noire* Gopalasamy for the last three years. It is sheer expediency, not principle, which has brought the AIADMK and the BJP together, as also the PMK and MDMK to the front.

According to sources close to Jayalalitha, she has dumped the Congress because the party is on the decline and one of the cardinal rules followed by her mentor MGR is to always back the possible winner at the Centre, so that one can rule peacefully in Tamil Nadu.

Jayalalitha, facing a barrage of corruption cases slapped on her by the Karunanidhi government, seems convinced about the prospect of BJP forming the government at the Centre. In that event, to be an electoral ally of that party will not only save the AIADMK from being destroyed by the DMK but also protect her from harassment. Moreover, she feels that the AIADMK is on a comeback trail and even if she wins six or seven seats it will be a slap on the face of the DMK-TMC combine which made a clean sweep last time.

RAVI SUNDARAM

Advani and Jayalalitha: political expediency, not principle

Advani sidetracked the issue of coalition and made it clear that at the moment there was no such proposal. Jayalalitha, however, said: "We want to play an active part at the Centre"

She now talks about "stability" which has always been a favourite election issue with the voters in the state. And Advani in his Tirunelveli speech said he had accepted the invitation to participate in the AIADMK conference as a person who subscribed to the notion that regional pride and national pride were complementary and not contradictory.

Advani, like other speakers, was careful not to talk about corruption and harped on stability. He sidetracked the issue of coalition and made it clear that at the moment there was no such proposal. Jayalalitha, however, said: "We want to play an active part at the Centre."

The political buzz is that the BJP might ditch Jayalalitha and hitch their bandwagon to the DMK after the polls. Jayalalitha dismissed it as hypothetical as she felt that the DMK better watch out for the TMC might soon merge with the Congress.

Ever since Gopalasamy had split with the DMK, his new party, the MDMK, has been struggling to make electoral gains as it came a cropper in the last elections. The AIADMK and MDMK had informal ties at the local body elections after the DMK came to power. Now, the tacit understanding has blossomed into a formal alliance. Similar is the case with the PMK which has been left out by Karunanidhi. Both MDMK and PMK are also keen on getting the minimum of four per cent of the valid votes to get back the Election Commission's recognition as a state party.

As far as Jayalalitha is concerned, to defeat her 'enemy number one' Karunanidhi, support from any quarter is welcome. The LTTE tag attached to the MDMK and the PMK did not worry her as the "LTTE cannot be an issue in the coming election".

All the parties have differences of opinion with the BJP on issues such as Ayodhya, uniform civil code and Article 370. Jayalalitha also says the AIADMK might not gain substantially from the alliance with the BJP but the main objective was "a stable and able government at the Centre".

The Tirunelveli meet has definitely boosted the sagging morale of Jayalalitha and her AIADMK. The massive gathering which Advani described as "one of the biggest political events I have attended in my life" has convinced the AIADMK cadres that their *puratchi thalaivi* (revolutionary leader) is on the comeback trail. •

Sreedhar Pillai/Tirunelveli

OF LETTERS

Prafulla Kumar Mahanta: what he was and what he's become

"Prafulla Kumar Mahanta belongs to the rare, almost vanishing, breed of politicians whom power cannot corrupt..." — *Current's* tribute to their Man of the Year, 1988, selected by a distinguished panel of five top Indian journalists.

A decade has passed since. A decade of decadence for Indian politics. And Prafulla Kumar Mahanta — chief minister of Assam, then and now — has gone the way of all political flesh. Today, the dawn of 1998, finds him desperately dodging the noose of the letter of credit (LoC) scam that threatens to bring a premature end to his second stint at the top.

From popular student leader, to the youngest chief minister in the country, to an effective Opposition leader, to an embattled chief minister struggling for survival — Mahanta has seen it all. From the great hope of the Assamese people, to the great betrayer, from the bell-bottomed student leader to the safari-suited politico, from the Mr Clean of Indian politics to only the second CM in Independent India to be charge-sheeted while in office (though the Governor's sanction was still awaited at the time of going to press) — he has been at it all.

It all began for him in a humble home of Koliabor in Nagoan district in central Assam. The eldest of the three sons of Debakanta Mahanta, a primary school teacher, Prafulla completed his LLB from Nagaon Law College. He had, by then, plunged into the student movement. As president of the All Assam Students Union (AASU), he and his friends took it upon themselves to make the dreams of a populace, hopelessly deprived for so long, come true. Backed by able lieutenants like Bhrigu Kumar Phukan, buoyed by the overwhelming support of the people, and riding the wave of the Assam Accord signed on 15 August, 1985, Mahanta made the transition from boy-scout activism to the big, bad world of politics.

When on the winter afternoon of 25 December, 1985, the 33-year-old Mahanta took oath as Assam's chief minister in the Nehru Stadium, some 50,000 had turned up to share that moment of history, to voice support for Their Chosen One. The celebrations were spontaneous, the euphoria all too evident. It was a time of change, of hope, of great expectations. And all eyes were on the country's first 'student' government, the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), and its young leader, Prafulla Mahanta.

AND CREDIT

HITESWAR SAIKIA

As leader of the Opposition, from 1991-96, Mahanta consistently criticised Saikia's policies, attacked his corrupt ways, and vehemently opposed his use of the army in suppressing the ULFA

THE UNITED LIBERATION FRONT OF ASSAM

The Mahanta-led AGP government's most glaring mistake was its "soft" stand on the ULFA

It did not take long for Mahanta to encounter the glitches of governance. He did make a mark as a politico with a difference — mild-mannered and down-to-earth. But that was about all. By the time the curtains were brought down abruptly, the Mahanta government's first term report card had few curricular activities to show. It was clear that the AGP leadership lacked the political maturity or the administrative vision to implement what it had set out to do. "Yes, we did make mistakes which exposed our lack of political experience," Mahanta had been the first to admit.

The most glaring one, of course, was the AGP's "soft" stand on the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). The ULFA, comprising members of the two primary bodies engaged in the anti-foreigners' movement — AASU and the Assam Jatiyobadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) — was formed in 1979 and resolved to take up armed struggle for the cause. Its growth in prominence coincided with the AGP's coming to power.

With the ULFA gaining ground and the AGP choosing to look the other way (the 'bond of brotherhood', the 'collective conscious' and all that), trouble was brewing for Mahanta. The ULFA killed top teaman Surrendra Paul in Doom Dooma on 7 April, 1990, established a parallel government of sorts in rural Assam and began extorting a hefty price from tea gardens. On 7 November, RAW conducted secret air-lifts from Dibrugarh to Guwahati to get tea families out of the killing fields.

This was the powerful tea lobby's way of expressing 'no confidence' in the AGP government's capability to tackle the ULFA problem. This set off a chain political reaction culminating on 27 November, 1990. That day, Governor D.D. Thakur dismissed Mahanta's government stating that there was a law-and-order crisis in the state with the "ULFA running the countryside". President's Rule was imposed in Assam. And the ULFA was banned.

A demoralised, disjointed AGP lost the Assembly elections in 1991 and the Hiteswar Saikia-led Congress regained control.

As leader of the Opposition, from 1991-96, Mahanta consistently criticised Saikia's policies, attacked his corrupt ways, and vehemently opposed his use of the army in suppressing the ULFA.

He also kept busy, touring the state and preparing the ground for an AGP comeback. The 1996 polls saw the AGP taking full advantage of the anti-incumbency syndrome and sweeping aside a Saikia-less Congress (the CM died six days before the elections).

Prafulla Mahanta took oath for the second time on 15 May, 1996. This time at a strictly 'political' function in the Raj Bhavan, sanitised of the popular outpourings that had marked the earlier occasion. But the important thing was that the people had given Mahanta a second chance. It was now upto him to make amends for his past failures and take Assam forward on the path of peace and progress.

The last one-and-a-half-years have marked the metamorphosis of Mahanta. But in his new avatar marked by uncharacteristic 'political will', 'assertiveness' bordering on 'aggression' — at least in matters related to the imposition of law and the restoration of order — Mahanta has lost many old friends and made a host of enemies.

The crackdown on the ULFA, after allegedly taking the insurgent outfit's help in the run-up to the elections, his so-called submission to the Delhi diktat, his reluctance to take a stand on the foreigners' issue, his failure to initiate developmental programmes, and now his

"HE IS A FASCIST"

Ajit Kumar Bhuiyan on how Mahanta has destroyed democracy in Assam

Q: You've worked for and then against Mahanta for years. How would you analyse the present scenario?

A: In December 1985, when Mahanta was taking oath as CM, there were many people behind him, believing in him. Now, 12 years later, Mahanta is in a position to go to jail and there is only a small group of opportunists behind him and no one believes him. I think that tells the story of Mahanta's betrayal of the faith that the people of Assam had reposed in him twice.

Q: What would you identify as the differences between Mahanta-I and Mahanta-II?

A: At first, as a [illegible] emotional wave to become CM. But [illegible] governance, it became clear that he [illegible]. He had no direction, no programme [illegible]. He and his men dominated the [illegible] the rest of administration [illegible].

[illegible] Mahanta has been exposed. He's not only [illegible], incoherent. And worst of all, he [illegible].

Q: How different was he from Saikia?

A: Mahanta was more directly involved in the LoC scam than Laloo was in the fodder scam. Forget about the CBI, the people of Assam have pronounced him guilty. Saikia was corrupt, but he had no commitment to a people.

Q: Your relationship with Mahanta has swung from one extreme to the other...

A: Yes, at the beginning, I was largely responsible for giving him the image of a leader. But when I began criticising his nepotism and inefficiency during the first term, it led to a confrontation. Indirectly under his pressure I was forced to leave *Asomiya Bani* and join *Sadin*.

After Saikia came to power, we, in *Sadin*, practically did Mahanta's work (as leader of Opposition) by exposing one scandal after another, including LoC. When I was arrested in 1994, a movement began for my release. Mahanta was part of a delegation that went to Delhi to meet the President, PM and home minister to press for my release.

With the Congress destroying the state, I played a definite role in making Mahanta CM again. I genuinely believed him when he promised not to repeat his mistakes. But then evidence of Mahanta's direct involvement in the LoC scam came to me. I realised that this man is corrupt and a liar. For this weakness, he sold himself to Delhi, and broke all his promises. When I continued to question him, on behalf of the people, he first gave me some 'offers' for a compromise, then arrested me on some ridiculous charges of backing the ULFA.

Q: Did Mahanta strike a deal with the ULFA before the 1996 elections?

A: Yes, he sat in the chair you are sitting on, and told me that an agreement with the ULFA boys had been worked out. But when he realised that the LoC papers were with Deve Gowda, he feared that the ULFA connection might work against him, so he changed tack completely and led an undemocratic crack-down.

Q: Have you spoken to Mahanta since your arrest?

A: He had called me before my arrest. I refused to talk to him. And now, of course, he won't dare try. •

BHRIGU PHUKAN

"Mahanta has changed quite dramatically in this term. He has lost all credibility and has become a liability for the party."

name being linked to the LoC scam — have provided enough fodder for the anti-Mahanta cannons.

"Mahanta has changed quite dramatically in this term," says Bhrigu Phukan, who has fallen out with his former comrade and is now one of his bitterest critics. "He has lost all credibility and has become a liability for the party." Mahanta's political nursery, AASU, is thoroughly disillusioned with the CM. "The lust for the benefits of power and the insecurity of losing them have made the hero of a generation its biggest villain," alleges Sarbananda Sonowal, the organisation's president.

Similar noises of discontent emanate from the AJYCP. Says president B.P. Choudhury: "He's done more harm to Assam than Saikia. The people trusted him and he betrayed that trust. That is criminal." Adip Phukan's, who was "used" by the AGP to win the support of tribal and minority groups during the elections, is another anguished voice. "Mahanta and his ministers are just not interested in working for the development of Assam. They are now hell-bent

on looting the state. They have betrayed the original cause: that of furthering progressive democratic regionalism."

Mahanta's transformation from a soft, indecisive, titular head, to an almost autocratic man of decisive, often drastic, action can quite accurately be attributed to his aspirations for a national role in politics. Having found pride of place in the Delhi durbar, the Assam CM is not willing to let it go. An all-out war against the ULFA was a political prerequisite — for which he was even ready to take on Tata Tea. The Mahanta of old would have shouldered arms. Now, he was up in arms "against all anti-nationals" and determined to "root out" insurgency.

To the credit of the chief minister, and to his unified command, the peace at any cost motto worked. There was improved coordination among the security forces and the administration, far greater motivation, and the law-and-order situation improved quite significantly. "Mr Mahanta has endeavoured to create conditions by which a legitimate government can impose its authority in order to curb insurgency and start the process of development," observes chief secretary V.S. Jafa. "And I believe that these can be achieved over a period of time under Mr Mahanta's leadership," adds the Assam administration's man of steel.

THE PEACE PROCESS

Mahanta, after the 1996 elections, he was up in arms "against all anti-nationals" and determined to "root out" insurgency. And to his credit, and that of his unified command, the peace at any cost motto worked

But now, Mahanta's peace process — controversial in means, effective in ends — and, indeed, his political future could trip at the LoC hurdle. This comes at a curious time for Assam. For, in a way, the state needs Mahanta, to prevent it from disintegrating into administrative chaos. Businessman Rajiv Kumar Bora of Guwahati gives words to a growing concern: "The need of the hour is security. And without Mahanta we fear that violence will escalate." In other words, Mahanta must stay. Many feel that Mahanta's role in the LoC scam is being played up by all those who "benefit from the business of insurgency".

When and if the charge-sheet comes through, the Assam CM will have to go (even if for a while) and hand over charge to a consensus (or rather compromise) candidate from within the party ranks. When that day arrives, Mahanta's political life would come a near full circle: the proverbial fall from grace of a man who, even most of his detractors admit, is a "gentleman".

And as Assam decks up to celebrate Bihu, its chief minister spends his cheerless days in isolation — pondering over what it was that had gone wrong. •

Sumit Das Gupta with Dilip Chandan/Guwahati

Prafulla Kumar Mahanta lives on borrowed time as the LoC scam threatens to pluck him out of the chief minister's chair

TO STAY OR GO?

R.C. Sharma: on 9 November, the CBI director blew the lid on Mahanta by stating that the Assam chief minister had already been 'examined' in connection with the Demow case

On 15 May, 1996, soon after taking oath as chief minister for the second time, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta had pledged to wipe out the legacy of "Congress misrule" and provide "clean and stable" governance in Assam. Today, Mahanta is desperate to appear 'clean' himself, and the ruling Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) is struggling to maintain a 'stable' front.

So, what went terribly wrong? Within months of Mahanta taking fresh guard, the renewed threat of insurgency rocked Assam. The need of the hour was to bring peace to the state, provide security to the people. The CM slipped into the role of commander-in-chief and marshalled his forces and resources to combat all "anti-nationals".

He was also a vital component of the coalition at the Centre. And with the United Front living dangerously, Mahanta was desperately dividing his time between Guwahati and Delhi. All this while, the silent, sinister shadow of a scam was closing in on the Assam CM. The multi-crore letters of credit (LoC) scam, the largest one of its kind in this part of the world, was ticking away like a time-bomb, ready to explode and shatter the fragile political situation of Assam.

But what is this potent device of political destruction? Simply put, the LoC scam refers to the embezzlement of more than Rs 200 crore from the state treasury through fake/doctored letters of credit issued by various departments. The siphoning of funds in this fraudulent manner was carried out by the contractor-bureaucrat-politician nexus during the period, 1986-1992, thus encompassing the terms of two governments. First, the Prafulla Mahanta-led AGP, and then the late Hiteswar Saikia-led Congress.

The modus operandi was ridiculously simple. The state treasuries dole out money against LoCs from various departments. So all that the racketeers had to do was forge these pieces of paper and 'encash' them. These excess withdrawals ran into crores and benefited top politicos from the two rival parties, officials in the respective departments, and 'resourceful' businessmen.

The scent of a scam was first detected in 1993, when the erratic and excessive withdrawals from various state treasuries came into focus. In a confidential note, the then additional chief secretary, J.K. Bagchi, had written to chief minister Saikia: "It seems most excess [with]drawals took place in all probability by tampering with the LoC documents..." This was 26 January, 1993. And the LoC scam was born.

In March 1993, Saikia admitted in the state Assembly that more than Rs 200 crore had been siphoned from state treasuries by presenting forged LoCs. In April that year, the CM appointed a one-man enquiry committee — comprising the then additional chief secretary, K.S. Rao. In his report submitted on 4 March, 1993, Rao confirmed that Rs 112.12 crore had been fraudulently withdrawn from ten of the state's 30 treasuries. The Rao Committee also indicted 56 government officials, including 36 officers from the veterinary department. With a lot of heat being generated over the matter — especially by the Mahanta-led

Charges Against Mahanta

- In the run-up to the 1991 Assembly polls, prime accused Rajendra Bora distributed 'drafts,' ranging from Rs 20,000 to Rs 1 lakh in Nagaon, Mahanta's constituency. These drafts were handed over to sports clubs, social organisations and *naamghars* (places of prayer).

- Corrugated sheets worth Rs 45 lakh were bought by Bora and sent to the district treasurer of the AGP in Nagaon, Dhiren Barkakati, who allegedly sold these off and pumped in the money into Mahanta's poll campaign. Barkakati later handed over the remaining money to Mahanta at his official residence in Guwahati.

- In September 1991, Bora financed the air travel and part of the Delhi stay of then AGP Legislature Party leader Mahanta and seven AGP MLAs.

Opposition AGP — the Congress government asked the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to probe the LoC scam. It was 16 March, 1994. And the so-called wheels of justice, irrevocable and irresistible, had been set into motion.

Now, almost four years later, the dubious drama involving the letters of discredit, has reached a dramatic climax. After a painfully slow start, the country's premier investigating agency is busy putting the finishing touches to the last of the 12 LoC cases it was probing. Charge-sheets have been filed in 11 cases, hundreds interrogated and several arrested.

The one that remains is the big one: the Demow treasury case, accounting for Rs 48 crore of fraudulent withdrawal. In the dock is an all-star political cast, led by Mahanta.

Keeping the chief minister company in the Demow Hall of Infame are (among others) three former ministers, Dilip Saikia Sonowal and Barki Prasad Telenga of the AGP and Nakul Das of the Congress(I). The man who had, allegedly, played a lead role — Hiteswar Saikia — is no more. But his son, Debabrata Saikia, is also in the line of fire.

Demow, in Upper Assam's Sibsagar district, was the happy hunting ground of prime accused Rajendra Prasad Bora — a veterinary department employee-turned-contractor, and then AGP member-turned-Congressman. Bora and his accomplices cashed in on the funds allocated for the integrated Cattle Development Project in Demow and diverted them into the right administrative and political pockets of the AGP and Congress regimes.

For Mahanta, the LoC scam probe has turned out to be something of a Frankenstein. It was, largely, under pressure from the AGP chief (with his typical "truth must prevail" lines) that the then Congress government had handed over the case to the CBI. And today, the CBI's 'prima facie' case against him is ready to rob Mahanta of his chair.

On 9 November, CBI director R.C. Sharma blew the lid on Mahanta by stating that the Assam CM had already been 'examined' in connection with the Demow case. It was all too evident that a charge-sheet was on its way. But the prospect of making Mahanta the second sitting chief minister (after Laloo Prasad Yadav) to be charge-sheeted, forced the CBI to exercise caution and go through the proper channels — the law ministry and then the Governor. At the time of going to press, the CBI was ready to submit its final report to the Guwahati High Court, as directed by Chief Justice M. Ramakrishna and Justice P.C. Phukan monitoring the LoC cases. And it was awaiting Governor Lt.-Gen (retd) S.K. Sinha's sanction to prosecute the CM.

Facing the humiliating prospect of having to abdicate his chair under corruption charges, Prafulla Mahanta has been a picture of dogged, often angry, defiance. "It's a political conspiracy by the Congress and business houses [led by Tata Tea] to malign me and destabilise my government. And the CBI is part of the nexus," has been the CM's standard line. He insists that he is "innocent" and that "an impartial probe" would have proved it. But now, the ball is in The Court. In a rash and ridiculous move, Mahanta had even filed an affidavit seeking "interim protection" against the CBI. The Guwahati High Court promptly shot it down.

With the law coming into play and preparing to "take its own course" in yet another political context, Assam gears up for trouble at the top. It's probably just a matter of time before Mahanta will be forced to step down on "moral grounds". The AGP has always been very particular about projecting a "clean" image. At a general council meeting on 18 August, 1995, the party had even adopted a unanimous resolution that it would "not protect any party member who is named by the CBI in the LoC scam". Now is the AGP's time of reckoning: will it bend the rules for its 'first among equals'?

By the look of things, it will not. Frenetic behind-the-scenes activity in the AGP camp are now centred around short-listing Mahanta's probable successors, from amongst a woefully-inadequate second-rung. Higher education minister Thaneswar Boro, party vice-president and municipal affairs minister Biraj Sharma, industry minister Gunin Hazarika, and PWD minister Atul Bora are said to be heading the list of hopefuls. There is even talk of a true Laloo-style coup, with Jayshree Mahanta doing a Rabri Devi, but Assam is no Bihar and Prafulla no Laloo.

Mahanta-baiters are, of course, sharpening their knives. "Mahanta must step down immediately," asserts rebel AGP leader Bhrigu Kumar Phukan. "There is no way he can continue in the CM's chair after being charge-sheeted," adds state Congress president Tarun Gogoi.

The United Front is backing his play. And the LoC case against him is, in all probability, too weak to stand up for itself in court. But yet, the 'lettering' is very much on the wall for Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. •

Sumit Das Gupta/Guwahati

DRAGGING ITS

The United Front refuses to take a stand against Mahanta regarding his involvement in the LoC scam

There seems to be one law for Laloo Prasad Yadav; and another for Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. Or that is what it appears from the United Front's approach to the Letter of Credit (LoC) scam.

Before the Bihar chief minister was even charge-sheeted in the fodder scam, there were cries that he should step down from office. Not surprisingly, the loudest demands came from his own party, the Janata Dal, where Laloo's detractors such as Sharad Yadav and Deve Gowda saw this as an ideal opportunity to cut him to size. When Laloo turned to others such as the Andhra chief minister Chandrababu Naidu, they took the moral high ground and advised him to step down voluntarily. The CPI(M)'s Harkishen Singh Surjeet saw the way the wind was blowing, and after the CPI(M) and Laloo parted ways, saw the opportunity to play state politics. After upholding Laloo as the great secularist because he got L.K. Advani arrested after the Rath Yatra, the CPI(M) discovered that he was corrupt and sought his removal from the chief ministership. I.K. Gujral, who was trying to save his friend (Gujral was elected to the Rajya Sabha from Bihar), was badgered into taking a hard stance as well.

So things should have been no different when another UF chief minister was about to be charge-sheeted. Right?

Not quite. At a steering committee meeting of the United Front, it was only I.K. Gujral who raised the issue of Mahanta's impending charge-sheet. If the UF could take a hard stand against Laloo, then the same should apply to Mahanta, he ventured tentatively. However, this was shot down.

Naidu was practical in his approach. On the eve of general elections, it did not make sense to raise a hue and cry over Mahanta. If a member of the steering committee had to step down on charges of corruption, then it would send a wrong message, he argued. The Left agreed; after all, the CPI had a tie-up

"Why was only I arrested?"

According to R.P. Bora, prime accused in the LoC scam, he has been singled out by the CBI

According to the CBI charge-sheet, chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta has allegedly received Rs 26 lakh in bank drafts from Rajendra Prasad Bora, a veterinary contractor and chairman of the State Livestock Corporation (1990). Bora does not deny that he paid Mahanta. All that he wants to know is that while he has been in CBI custody, his property and assets have been attached by the state and his offer to turn approver for the state ignored, no such action has been taken against the chief minister.

Q: When do you expect Mahanta to be arrested?
A: *(Smiles)* Not until the Governor gives permission.

Q: Then why is the Governor delaying?
A: I.K. Gujral wants to save him, with the help of CBI director R.C. Sharma. Even Chandrababu Naidu and Harkishen Singh Surjeet are scared that it won't look good if a member of the steering committee is arrested before the elections.

You see, this is my appeal: there are others who have been accused as well, so why was only I arrested? My properties have been attached—incidentally, these were bought out of my earnings since 1975 and the LoC scam took place much later. That's okay. But why has no action been taken against the others accused? Why haven't their properties been attached?

Q: How long were you in CBI custody? What did you tell them during your interrogation?
A: During 1995, I was in CBI custody for 12 days and police custody for two months. I told the CBI that out of

FEET

Chandrababu Naidu: insisted that raising a hue and cry over Mahanta would send out wrong signals to the electorate

Laloo Prasad Yadav: his removal from the chief ministership was sought by the UF, following revelations about the fodder scam

with the AGP at the state level.

"Actually Mahanta has told the UF that if they don't come out with an official statement saying that Mahanta need not resign unless he has been proven guilty, he will tie up with the BJP," says Santosh Mohan Dev, Congress MP from Assam.

In practical terms however, this seems to be an empty threat. The AGP has come to power in Assam on the strength of a Muslim vote bank. In fact, the party has as many as 11 Muslim MLAs who would resign if such a tie-up took place. There is no way that Mahanta would take the risk of an alliance with the BJP.

But it seems that Naidu and Co. are willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Although the CBI chief, R.C. Sharma, is not known for giving in to political pressure, there is no denying that the UF is not keen to see justice done in this case. Even though the CBI gave its final report to Governor S.K. Sinha on 30 December, the investigating agency is still awaiting the nod from Raj Bhavan. After sitting on the report for eight days, the Governor demanded several clarifications and additional documents.

But according to R.P. Bora, the prime accused, once the sanction is given, Mahanta will find it difficult to wriggle out. In addition, the state Congress — led by Rajya Sabha MP Matang Singh — will demand that Mahanta steps down.

What will the UF do then? •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

the Rs 200-crore scam, I could account for Rs 48 crore. *(According to the CBI, Bora had 'fraudulently' withdrawn Rs 48 crore from the Sibsagar treasury for supplies made to the Intensive Cattle Development Project [ICDP] at Demow).*

I have given the CBI adequate proof that I paid Mahanta Rs 4 crore in cash. In addition, I also gave him Rs 45 lakh worth of corrugated iron-sheets for building purposes. I also gave him Rs 39 lakh in bank drafts made out to various clubs and institutions in his constituency. He distributed these in my presence. He also made me give Rs 4 lakh to a Madurai party to put up banners in his constituency in the 1991 general elections. I have also picked up Mahanta's air-tickets to Delhi and back as well as his hotel bills.

Q: Why did you do this?
A: *(Laughs) CM jo bolega, to dena parta hai* (If the CM asks, you have to give).

Q: Was it the same with Hiteswar Saikia, the former CM?
A: Dr Jinil Deori (who was with the ICDP then) gave him Rs 7 crore on 1 October, 1991, to buy government vehicles. He bought a Gypsy and an Ambassador with that. I was present then.

Q: Who are the others?
A: The AGP labour minister, Barki Prasad Telenga took Rs 4 crore; the minister of health, Dawan Ghatowar, was paid Rs 20 lakh in my presence by R. Bhumika (an accountant with ICDP) and then I paid him Rs 16 lakh in cash; and Dilip Saikia Sondwal who was health minister from 1988-90 took Rs 7 crore in front of me from Dr I. Haque, an official from ICDP.

Q: He took the entire sum — Rs 7 crore — in cash?
A: *(Laughs)* It is very easy to give Rs 7 crore — in Rs 500 notes. It will all fit in one gunny bag.

I have told the CBI all this and given them proof. In addition, also wrote to the CBI on 18 August last year, and told them that I was willing to turn approver. After all, I was on proof. If they can make Shailendra Mahato an approver in the JMM case, then why not me? That means, the CBI wants to save all the others accused. Otherwise, why have they not arrested any of the others? It's not that they don't have proof. •

No escape

ULFA general secretary Anup Chetia's arrest in Dhaka comes as a body-blow to the organisation

The New Year brought bad tidings for the United Liberation Front of Assam or by now the hugely famous/infamous ULFA. On 3 January, news broke that ULFA general secretary Anup Chetia alias Golap Barua and his two aides had been arrested in Dhaka, the Bangaldesh capital that had long served as a haven for the secessionist group. The information was flashed by the Dhaka press almost a fortnight after the detention. Chetia and his comrades — Babul Marma, 27, and Laxmi Pradip, 28 — were arrested on 21 December from their residence on Green Road in Dhaka.

For an outfit that poses to be confident of taking on the Indian state and liberating Assam from the 'neo-colonial' clutches of New Delhi, Chetia's arrest was a classic case of being caught unawares. An insurgent group that is supposed to have its ears close to the ground, the ULFA had obviously failed to sense a shift in policy: that the Bangladesh government, which had long played the conniving host, was no longer keen to shelter the rebel leaders.

Chetia's arrest could have far-reaching consequences for the ULFA, which is believed to have crores of rupees stashed away in Bangladesh banks and had been using Dhaka as a quiet rendezvous for planning its campaigns.

But it has also put Bangladesh in a fix. In a fax message on 5 January, ULFA commander-in-chief Paresh Barua appealed to Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina not to turn Chetia over to Indian authorities. In his message Barua pointed out that millions in the Indian state of Assam and West Bengal had provided moral and material support to Bangladeshis during the bloody nine-month-long liberation war against Pakistan. In a like manner, Barua claimed, the ULFA was fighting the domination of New Delhi over Assam and characterised their movement as a struggle for freedom.

The message appears to have made the Hasina government somewhat circumspect about what it does with Chetia. This is especially so because former Prime Minister and Hasina's arch-rival Begum Khaleda Zia, who is also the leader of the Opposition in Bangladesh Parliament, has made her pro-ULFA sen-

Streets of Dhaka: no more safe for ULFA

timents clear. She has called the guerrillas "freedom fighters" and warned Hasina's "pro-Indian" government not to allow Delhi transit rights to ferry Indian troops and arms through Bangladesh to the seven north-eastern states of India. Any such move, she has said, would open up Bangladesh territory for a war on the ULFA.

Not surprisingly, the Bangladesh government is treading cautiously. As SUNDAY went to press, the police was still interrogating Chetia and his two aides but revealed little to the press. In fact, foreign minister Abdus Samad Azad made it clear that the government won't be forthcoming. On 4 January — 13 days after the arrest — Azad said that all details would be made public if investigations proved that the detained men belonged to the ULFA. Evidently, the government was reluctant to make any statement, although the police had identified the men as ULFA leaders.

Chetia and his comrades were being held in the high-security Dhaka Central Jail after being questioned by different intelligence agencies, while senior home ministry officials maintained that Chetia's wife and two children, who used to live with him in Dhaka, were in safe custody. So far, the government has ruled out Chetia's extradition on the ground that there is no relevant treaty between Bangladesh and India. The government is also believed to have rejected the suggestion that the Indian Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) be allowed to interrogate Chetia and his associates.

In a confessional statement, Chetia is said to have admitted that he and his two comrades had been living in Dhaka for more than a year. The three men also confessed that they were among the ULFA's top leaders and that Chetia was chief of the outfit's political wing.

Chetia, along with his wife, two children and the two comrades lived in a luxury apartment in the bustling Mohammadpura area for about seven months. At the time of going to press, the police said that they had no idea about the whereabouts of Chetia's wife and children. But home ministry officials said they were being interred somewhere in Dhaka under heavy security.

The rented flat had cost Chetia Taka 8,000 per month. He had told the landlord that he and his two friends worked in a non-governmental organisation based in Habiganj. Earlier they had lived in the Mirpur and Kalyanpur areas of Dhaka, and all through spoke fluent Bengali.

Sheikh Hasina Wajed: friendly gesture

Khaleda Zia: pro-ULFA sentiments

The police recovered from Chetia two Bangladeshi passports bearing the names David Marma and William Barnard. The passports had been issued on 1 and 13 June 1996 and Chetia used the fake documents to travel extensively in Asia, Europe and Africa. Before his arrest, he had been to Bangkok.

The ULFA had obviously failed to sense a shift in policy: that the Bangladesh government, which had long played the conniving host, was no longer keen to shelter the rebel leaders

Anup Chetia: end of the road

Chetia also told the police that he had another Bangladeshi passport that carried the name Abdul Aziz. He had used these papers to travel to South Africa, from where he returned on 3 December last year. Apart from the passports, the police have seized from Chetia computer discs, two satellite phones, two ordinary phones, fax and photocopier machines, foreign currency to the tune of 3,00,000 Indian rupees, and a pile of confidential papers. Sources say that a manhunt began after the Paris-based Interpol alerted Bangladesh about the presence of the ULFA leaders.

Chetia and his comrades have been charged with unlawful entry, possession of fake passports and illegal possession of foreign currency. The cases will be fought in Bangladesh, and there seems little likelihood of Chetia being handed over to India. Bangladesh fears the risk of ULFA reprisals in Dhaka if Paresh Barua's plea is ignored. "Dhaka prefers to follow a quiet policy of sueing the ULFA general secretary and keep him in custody," said an official.

Former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia had, however, had handed over two ULFA activists to India during her tenure even though there was no formal extradition treaty between the two countries.

But Anup Chetia is too hot a person to he handled in haste. •

Rahman Jahangir/Dhaka

RAJIV SHUKLA

For the top slot

Sonia Gandhi is emerging as the Congress' most acceptable nominee as PM

In case Sonia Gandhi does not want to be projected as the prime ministerial candidate of the Congress in the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections, former Union finance minister Manmohan Singh will be the most suitable Congress nominee for the same. Singh is not only known for his integrity and administrative acumen, but will also be a better choice against BJP stalwart Atal Behari Vajpayee than any other Congress leader.

In the given situation, Sonia Gandhi will obviously be the first choice of the party for the top slot. Not only does she have the capability to mobilise the Congress vote-bank but she can unite the entire party under her leadership. Her election rallies will be an evidence of the Nehru family's popularity among the masses. However, she wants to achieve good results for the party in the election before accepting any post.

The Congress would have fought this election without projecting a prime ministerial candidate had the BJP not announced Vajpayee's candidature. Initially, Sitaram Kesri was the obvious choice but a good number of Congress leaders do not like him and do oppose his candidature internally.

Those who are leaving the Congress are solely blaming Kesri for the downfall of the party. In fact, leaders have expressed the view that projecting Kesri against Vajpayee bleaks the chances of the Congress in the party forums.

Now, even the Congress has realised that the BJP's biggest strength is Atal Behari Vajpayee. His clean image and political acumen has lured many among the middle class. No other issue including Ayodhya is proving to be as beneficial for the BJP as that of Vajpayee's candidature. Whenever any voter is given the choice between Vajpayee and Kesri, his preference is obviously the former.

This is a very complicated issue for the Congress, and Kesri himself is aware of it. In fact, when the Deve Gowda government was brought down, Kesri had Manmohan Singh's name in his mind as one of the possible candidates for the prime ministership.

Singh maintains an excellent equation with Kesri as the latter inducted him twice into the CWC — the party's apex body — after becoming the party president, which Narasimha Rao did not. Apart from this, Manmohan enjoys the backing of a majority in the party for being non-controversial and a darling of the middle class.

The feeling in the Congress is that if Sonia is not keen to be the prime ministerial candidate, Singh is the best bet to compete with Vajpayee. Though the Congress has got a number of able politicians, none of them has a unanimous acceptability in the party. Sonia is the unanimous choice and after her, I think, Manmohan Singh figures as the second choice who has no enemy in the party. Singh is rated as the fittest person to stand up to Vajpayee's challenge.

The minority government of Narasimha Rao owed its stability to Singh's accomplished role as the architect of India's economic reforms to a large extent. His high moral reputation also cuts across party lines. Sonia Gandhi's imminent participation in the election campaign accompanied by Manmohan Singh's nomination as the prime ministerial candidate is expected to boost the party's poll prospects.

Sonia has the capability to mobilise the Congress vote-bank and she can also unite the entire party under her leadership

In the post-election scenario, if there is a possibility of the Congress-United Front coalition, Singh may be acceptable to all the UF constituents other than the communists. With Manmohan Singh as PM and P. Chidambaram as finance minister India may attract a lot many investors.

One thing is certain that if the Congress does not project Sonia or Manmohan Singh as the party's candidate for the top slot, the BJP has very good chances of forming the government at the Centre. •

Promised land

The Andhra CM is accused of being involved in dubious real estate deals

Even as the drive against unscrupulous realtors by the Andhra Pradesh government continues, encroachment of government land goes on unabated in Hyderabad and other cities. If allegations made by Opposition Congress politicians are any indication, prominent people close to the ruling Telugu Desam Party (TDP), including the chief minister's wife, feature as encroachers.

According to Congress legislature party leader P. Janardhan Reddy, film actor Murli Mohan — who owns the Jayabheri Enclave and heads the Andhra Pradesh Film Development Corporation besides being an active campaigner for the TDP — features high on the list of encroachers. Incidentally, the Jayabheri Enclave is coming up in the posh Madhapur belt of Hyderabad where a hitech city is being built.

"While the first two phases of Jayabheri Enclave took a long time to take shape, the third phase was completed within five months as Murli Mohan had the blessings of the CM. Moreover, some land was in the name of Bhuvaneswari, wife of CM," alleged an agitated Janardhan Reddy. The matter came up even in the Assembly. "This land was bought by me years ago and has no relevance to the allegation against Jayabheri," Naidu had replied in the House.

Madhapur village, located close to the posh Jubilee Hills in Hyderabad, has been attracting the attention of real estate sharks. Earlier, the government had demarcated the zone as a core area for setting up institutions. The Congress regime had earmarked the area for a technology park. But the project never came up. After the upgradation of Madhapur into a 'posh' area by the government, not only the Jayabheri Group but several other real estate promoters emerged on the scene. The land price around the nearby Jubilee Hills also shot up as a result.

Alleging gross irregularities in land deals, Janardhan Reddy pointed out that the land owned by Bhuvaneswari in Madhapur was more than what was permitted under the Urban Land Ceiling Act (ULCA). Murli Mohan also reportedly used the CM's clout to sell the plots even though the revenue ministry had, on 18 March 1996, directed him to not proceed with the sales. However, the joint collector of Rangareddy district, Kumudini Devi, was urged by the revenue secretary in December, 1996 not to interfere as the issue was being monitored by the CM himself.

The film actor, predictably, denied the charges. According to him, the first phase of Jayabheri Enclave came up during the Congress regime. "What is wrong in somebody (officials) promoting my case? I have not asked them for any favour," he said. Though Murli Mohan clarifies that there was no transaction after 1995, the Congress leader points to a report prepared by the joint collector in which she urges the government to put an end to these transactions and also to take the realtors into custody.

Around 30 to 40 acres of government land has reportedly been encroached upon by the Jayabheri Group. On this land, the company has set up Jubilee Enclave, Jayabheri Pine Valley and Jayabheri Enclave. "As per the offer given by the NTR government to regularise the encroachments, we had sought from the government 5.23 acres, as my land was of uneven shape" said Murli Mohan.

But the question is whether the CM, or anybody for that matter, was entitled to hold land which was over and above the amount specified under the ULCA. While the chief minister did not deny holding land in his wife's name, he defended himself by claiming that it was bought long before he took office as CM.

Since the Eighties, politicians had been eyeing the Madhapur area to rake in hefty profits. If Chandrababu Naidu held a few acres in his wife's name in Madhapur and later transferred them to Murli Mohan for commercial exploitation, on whom should the onus for misuse of office lie?

No prizes for guessing that. •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

Janardhan Reddy at Madhapur: damning revelations

Madhapur village, located close to the Jubilee Hills in Hyderabad, has attracted the attention of realtors. Earlier, the Congress regime had earmarked the area for a technology park. But the project never came up

OUR OWN ALIENS

For 50 years the Centre has denied them their rightful vote. The polls are likely to bypass the Indian enclaves in Bangladesh once more

They are little Indias that Indians have forgotten. Like islands surrounded by tossing seas or oases in the midst of parched deserts, parcels of Indian territory inside Bangladesh — called enclaves in official parlance — exist without any support from or links with the mainland. They are like pieces of no-man's land, shunned and forsaken by the Indian administration, and it's India's good luck that people living there still call themselves Indians.

Strictly, they have reasons not to do so. About 1.5 lakh people living in 130 enclaves inside Bangladesh have never voted in an Indian election, be they parliamentary, Assembly or Panchayat Raj referendums. And this time too, there is no indication yet that they will get the chance to exercise their franchise in the upcoming general elections. The political parties couldn't care less about them, the government is uninterested, and the Election Commission itself seems scarcely aware that they even exist.

This apathy contrasts sharply with the manner in which Bangladesh protects the rights of its citizens living in 95 Bangladeshi enclaves inside Indian territory. The country has ensured that its people vote in every election, and, ironically, it is the Indian administration that has provided logistic support to make that possible. Arrangements are made to enable Bangladeshi poll personnel to reach their enclaves by passing through Indian territory. But the Indian poll machinery has never reached its own people holed up in Indian enclaves in Bangladesh. And, this time too, doesn't promise to be an exception.

What's more, it's not just that they have been repeatedly denied their voting rights but every other facility that the Indian government is under obligation to offer them. The inhabitants, for example, complain that no census has been carried out for successive decades, and that the places don't have health centres, schools, police stations, panchayats or even ration shops. They say they have suffered this neglect right since the days of Jawaharlal Nehru to that of I.K. Gujral and wonder if they should still identify themselves as Indians.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, did some hard bargaining to take the Tin Bigha corridor in Cooch Behar on lease from India. This has enabled the country's administration to easily access its enclaves — Dahagram and Angrapota. However, the Indian government failed to secure any reciprocal right of passage to reach Indian territories.

These enclaves, according to the 1951 Census Report, "are fragments from the dismemberment of the famous Kamrup kingdom". Bits of that little empire were wrested by invading Bhutanese and Moghul armies during the 16th and 17th centuries. Similarly, the Rajas of Cooch Behar held enclaves of the Cooch Behar kingdom in Moghul territory. Later, when the British East India Company came to hold Cooch Behar as a feudatory state, "they preferred to let the arrangements on the enclaves continue", observes the census document.

SAUMITRA DASGUPTA

Innocents abroad: Indian children attending Bangladeshi schools

Since 1952, no step has been taken by the Indian government or by the Election Commission to enlist Indians in the enclaves

The enclaves form a tricky jigsaw. The Gazzette of India notes that "at the time of merger of the Indian State of Kochbihar (Cooch Behar) with West Bengal, there were 130 enclaves measuring more or less 20,957.07 acres. There were correspondingly 95 enclaves of Bangladesh situated within the district of Kochbihar. Another intriguing part is that there were enclaves within the enclaves. It so happens that while the parent enclave belongs to the Kochbihar district, the enclaves inset within these enclaves belong to Bangladesh".

These territorial satellites vary greatly in shape and size. One of them, Dahala Khagrabari, has an area of 2,650.35 acres, while another, Panishala, is no more than a small park measuring 0.27 acres. Administratively, these become difficult to manage, but Bangladesh appears to have done far better than India.

Since 1952, no step has been taken by the Indian government or by the Election Commission to enlist Indians living here. When the issue was raised in Parliament on 30 March, 1995, the then minister of external affairs, Pranab Mukherjee, admitted, "The Government of India has no administrative control or access to these enclaves lying within Bangladesh." He also conceded that the government had no reliable data on their population. In other words, the Centre didn't know then — and still doesn't — how many Indians are languishing in these abandoned lands.

On 5 December, 1991, when L.K. Advani questioned in Parliament the leasing of the Tin Bigha corridor to Bangladesh, Eduardo Faleiro, minister of state for external affairs, had explained that India was obliged to do so under international law, as two Bangladeshi enclaves were wholly "encircled and enclosed by territories of India". But Amar Roy Pradhan, the Forward Bloc MP from Cooch Behar in the last Lok Sabha, points out that 128 of the 130 Indian enclaves are similarly landlocked and wonders why India has never sought passage through Bangladeshi territory.

One argument in favour of the Tin Bigha transfer was that it would improve Indo-Bangla relations. But in reality, the Bangladeshi reaction was far from friendly. Cases of theft, dacoity, arson, rape and murder, according to reports, increased in the isolated Indian enclaves. On 30 August, 1992, 67 Indians were brutally slaughtered, hundreds fled their homes, and many houses were burnt down. "But even after all this, no central or state government officials visited the enclaves to find out how Indian citizens were living," says Roy Pradhan. Nor did these traumatised people get any help despite frantic appeals.

A year later, Sahid-ul-Islam and Tahid-ul-Islam, representatives of the evicted, met West Bengal chief minister Jyoti Basu, seeking rehabilitation. Basu pleaded helplessness, and the harassed people of the Indian enclaves were soon forgotten. The promises made at the time of the Tin Bigha agreement were never fulfilled. And, then, in September 1994, Sahid-ul-Islam was brutally murdered.

But the Indian conscience did not stir. When it concerns its own people, perhaps, it never will. •

Ivo Quha/Siliguri

Barrack intrigue

The appointment of Bangladesh's new army chief takes the military establishment by surprise

On the morning of 27 December, a weekly holiday, hundreds of rickshaws were found jammed on the roads of the well-fortified Dhaka Cantonment area. It attracted the attention of curious passers-by as such a scene was not expected in the highly sensitive locality.

Lt-Gen. Muhammad Mustafizur Rahman, the newly appointed Chief of Army Staff of Bangladesh's 1,25,000-strong army, came out of his military car, taking the military police at the entry checkposts by surprise. The C-in-C personally asked them to be vigilant. He went on to drop in at another entry point and gave similar instructions.

This was quite unprecedented for the security staff of the Dhaka Cantonment. Never before had they been instructed personally by any commander-in-chief on such matters during the last 26 years.

The result: every vehicle plying on the roads of the area close to the Prime Minister's secretariat is now a suspect. The burly soldiers stop and check even every rickshaw that comes their way.

But Lt-Gen. Mustafiz possibly has reasons to be extra-cautious. In fact, he is said to be somewhat shaky about the very forces under his command.

The unprecedented appointment of an officer on his way to retirement as the army chief by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has put the military in a flux.

Hasina, who also holds the powerful defence portfolio, took care to groom Mustafiz, her uncle by relation, for the coveted post. Immediately after sweeping the parliamentary elections in June 1996, Hasina made it clear that she would not let Mustafiz retire in the normal course.

The officer, who at that time was about to complete the first year of his two-year leave preparatory to retirement, was given a two-year extension and made director-general of the powerful National Security Intelligence.

And when Mustafiz was made the principal staff officer (PSO) to the armed forces division supervising the army, the navy and the air force on behalf of the Prime Minister, defence observers in Dhaka became sure that he was being groomed for the vital post.

Just about two months before Mustafiz's appointment as the army chief, Hasina told newsmen in London that she had plugged all holes in the military to stop the recurrence of any military coup.

Subid Ali Bhuiyan: unceremonious exit

Although Hasina's government exonerated Maj.-Gen. Bhuiyan of his alleged involvement in the Purulia arms-drop of December 1995, he was dumped in the backyard

Muhammad Mustafizur Rahman being decor

Bangladesh remained under military rule for nearly 15 out of 26 years since the country's bloody birth in 1971 and two elected Presidents — Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman — were both assassinated by two groups of disgruntled military officials.

The formal appointment of Mustafiz as the C-in-C was enough to fuel speculation in the Bangladeshi capital. A foreign news agency even reported that three senior military commanders resigned. The report was not true.

Hasina dodged past three senior commanders — Major-General Abdul Matin, Major-General Subid Ali Bhuiyan and Major-General Motiur Rahman — to appoint Mustafiz as the army chief. Observers feel that it has upset the chain of command which she, after coming to power, had promised to respect.

As per the books of the military, Maj.-Gen. Matin was to take over as the C-in-C. But he is retiring from service in February.

Lt-General in presence of Sheikh Hasina: coup from the top?

The next in order was Maj.-Gen. Subid Ali Bhuiyan. He was shunted to the Gazipur Ordnance Factory as its commandant from the powerful post of principal staff officer to the armed forces division. His fault: serving Hasina's arch-rival, former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, as the PSO.

Maj.-Gen. Bhuiyan was appointed PSO by the caretaker President, Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, in 1991. He later continued in his job during Khaleda's rule.

Although Hasina's government exonerated Maj.-Gen. Bhuiyan of his alleged involvement in the Purulia arms-drop incident which took place in December 1995, he was dumped in the backyard. He was sent on leave summarily, preparatory to retirement without any reason assigned by the high command of the armed forces division on 2 December, 1997.

Incidentally, it was the day the Hasina government signed the controversial peace agreement with the country's tribal guerrillas under the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity. Possibly, she thought, he might mobilise other officers from the military establishment to oppose the agreement.

Ironically, analysts feel that by excluding Maj.-Gen. Matin and Maj.-Gen. Bhuiyan from the power caucus of the army, Hasina in effect axed the senior officers who had saved Bangladesh from returning to military rule in 1996.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who also holds the powerful defence portfolio, took care to groom Mustafiz, her uncle by relation, for the coveted post

Maj.-Gen. Matin, Maj.-Gen. Bhuiyan, Maj.-Gen. Ruhul Amin Chowdhury and Maj.-Gen. Imamuzzaman had acted together to foil a mutiny in May 1996 when the then army chief, Lt-Gen. Mohammad Nasim, defied an order of the then supreme commander, President Abdur Rahman Biswas, to sack some indisciplined officers and asked military units in different parts of the country to march to the capital.

But the four military commanders swung into action to stamp out the planned coup just three weeks before the 12 June parliamentary election.

"If Lt-Gen. Nasim could succeed in his mission to siege the presidential office that day, it was almost certain that he would have assumed power," said a military analyst, who was a general during President H.M. Ershad's reign. More so, because there was no elected government in Bangladesh at that time with Justice Mohammad Habibur Rahman heading a caretaker administration.

While Bhuiyan was the PSO, Matin was the director-general of forces intelligence then. Imamuzzaman was chief of the powerful Ninth Division controlling Dhaka and Chowdhury was military secretary to the supreme commander, that is, President Biswas.

On 20 May, 1996, Bhuiyan rushed to the presidential office at Bangabhaban and controlled the crack commandos of the Presidential Guard Regiment in close cooperation with Chowdhury. Matin and Imamuzzaman joined them in containing the rebellion sparked off by the army chief.

Nasim had sharply reacted to their swift action to foil his move and attached Bhuiyan and Matin. Their photographs were pasted at all entry and exit points of the Dhaka Cantonment to arrest them. But the move failed as Matin and Bhuiyan were under the armed forces division commanded directly by the President as per the constitutional amendment that created the caretaker government. Nasim was later arrested, sacked and interned in the barracks.

So it came as a surprise that the axe has fallen on officers whose timely action facilitated the holding of elections that brought Hasina to power.

Did Hasina get a hint that her trusted commanders had other loyalties? •

Rosalind Rose/Dhaka

MAJ. GEN. ASHOK K. MEHTA

The IAF now has a low-intensity class war on its hands

THANKS TO

There is no good or bad year for the armed forces. Nowadays it is just bad. 1997, which will be remembered as the year of the Fifth Pay Commission (FPC), was no exception. It epitomised gross mishandling and misuse of the FPC by politicians, bureaucrats and at times, even soldiers, for placing their narrower self-interests above national interests.

The composition of the FPC was flawed and biased against the services. It was allowed to be hijacked by its member secretary, now aviation secretary, Mr Kaw. And its recommendations are today in a tailspin thanks to the confusion in the IAF. After two and a half years of deliberation, the FPC award was declassified on 31 January, 1997. It was replete with anomalies unacceptable to any self-respecting serviceman.

For the first time ever, the three services had made a combined case under the flag of Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC). This flawed award set in motion a chain of protest notes, service chiefs' meetings with the Prime Minister followed by unkept promises and more protest notes leading to confusion and division in the ranks.

The tri-service approach briefly injected into the COSC was not maintained. Individual service headquarters began bargaining and doing deals with the ministry of defence (MoD). Although the services have obtained most of their demands, especially for personnel below officer rank, the FPC award (and contra awards) has opened a Pandora's box.

It has exposed the absence of the institutions of defence and national security management — lack of cohesion in the COSC, the pre-eminence of the policy of divide and rule in the bureaucracy and the void between the government and the services.

This was evident in the near-collapse of the morale and leadership of the Indian Air Force (IAF) which could have been prevented. For a chief of staff who wants to turn the IAF into an 'Indian Air and Space Force,' Air Chief Marshal S.K. Sareen has landed the world's fourth largest air force in a big mess.

The IAF is in revolt, and in the words of a retired air marshal, 'in complete disarray' over the deification of the fighter pilot — first hiking his flying allowance over that of the transport and helicopter pilot, thereby creating a caste system within the flying branch of the air force, and then, causing serious pay package disparities between fliers and non-fliers.

When asked what the real problem in the IAF is, the quick reply from its pilots (even the fighter class) is 'Sareen.' And these concerned fliers immediately add: "He's also the solution."

Sareen's fighters, who constitute only one-third of the 3,000 fliers, have created the problem by disturbing the relativity and disparities between different branches of the air force. Sareen is seen to be so bull-headed that he did not heed the warning signals and brazenly advanced the case of fighter pilots — referring to them as the *creme de la creme*, tip of the lance, etc., while being insensitive to the feelings of the others in the air force. (At an air force base, in his address, he referred to the others as 'leeches'.)

"Instead of acting like the chief of the entire air force, he has behaved like the

SAREEN...

Air Chief Marshal Sareen: stirring up a hornets' nest

The unrest in the IAF should be a warning to the other two services. The threat of this breakdown is greatest to the army

chief of the fighter pilots' association," remarked a retired helicopter pilot. By contrast, Gen. V.P. Malik, on taking over as army chief, in an interview to SUNDAY, insisted he be projected as the Chief of Army Staff and not as the chief from the principal fighting arm — the infantry. The all-arms composition of his secretariat clearly reflects this.

Some extremely unfortunate and deplorable events and incidents have been staged by sections of the air force, mainly the non-fliers, to register their angst and frustration over the huge pay disparities. What made these countrywide acts of despair and defiance even more reprehensible was the wives of servicemen spearheading these unprecedented public demonstrations.

The IAF leadership has failed on two counts. It put up a set of proposals which were designed to create relativity among fliers when everywhere else, it is this relativity which is sought to be bridged. Such a change enhancing the flying bounty across the board was needed and welcome, though not the stark segregation of fliers into fighters, test pilots and others. The second failure was not anticipating the fallout from these changes and creating a containment and damage-limitation mechanism.

Sareen ignored the writing on the wall. He took lightly even the warning note sent to him by one of his regional Cs-in-C that a revolt was brewing in his command. Nearly one month after the IAF was declared a 'disturbed force', did Sareen think it fit to act by visiting a forward base and interacting with air force personnel.

The IAF was the first service which unilaterally issued the pay commission notification for officers creating the ruckus. The other two services had withheld the separate notifications. For the first time in the history of the most obedient armed forces in the world, the services had virtually refused to convert the government notification on the FPC for implementation till their demands were met.

Each service has its Brahmins and *Shudras*. The army's internal strife is usually between the infantry and other arms. The regiment of the army chief of the day comes to be regarded as a kind of mafia. The naval fight is between ship drivers, aviators and lately, submariners. The air war is fighter pilots versus the rest. Now, aerial combat has spread to the ground.

The uproar and unrest in the IAF should be a warning to the other two services not to gloss over the leadership, man-management and welfare functions of command. The threat of this breakdown is greatest to the army. The government must take greater care in the selection of higher command including service chiefs. That is one more lesson from the fallout of the FPC.

A former air chief says all pilots must get the same flying bounty. But the revolt must be crushed immediately. Grave damage has been done to one of the finest air forces in the world. The high level panel on pay disparities set up by Air headquarters and one more anomalies committee instituted by the MoD have an uphill task of satisfying non-fliers in the IAF and reconciling the risk factor with a matching allowance. The army and navy have taken the line that all their aircraft are combat aircraft; hence all their pilots and aircraft are fighters. •

(The author was a general officer commanding of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force [South] in north-eastern Sri Lanka. He is also a founder member of the Defence Planning Staff of the Chiefs of Staff Committee)

AMITA MALIK

Risque business

Indian channels are as guilty of airing obscene programmes as foreign ones

One never did find out what happened to that much-hyped Adult Channel which was to have hit our TV screens some time ago. But channel-surfing on New Year'sEve and just after midnight had ushered in the New Year, after I had finished with the Pran-noy Roys and other recognisable stars, I hit pay dirt.

I rubbed my eyes in amazement: could this be Indian television, the very same which was to protect us from the evil designs, the western immorality of STAR TV and the rest? But yes, it was Sun TV. And they were really having a ball. Women with fat thighs, padded bras and skimpy panties were prancing about. A man with a horrible leer sat with a glass of liquor and ogled at one of them as she rolled about, did sexy somersaults on the floor and then dragged herself nearer and nearer until they did a slow dissolve into bed. Another feature of this sequence was that there was another sexy pair watching. Not exactly multiple sex but voyeurs within voyeurs, if you see what I mean.

I wondered why the public interest litigants were focussing their attention only on STAR TV when they had enough on these Indian channels to provide ample evidence for a hundred obscenity suits. And where are the Thought Police who seize books and magazines at the Customs?

To make sure that it was not a momentary aberration, I sat up again after midnight on New Year's Day to make doubly sure. And this time, I must say, Sun TV beat ATN, which had scored top marks for obscenity the night before. This evening, most of the Sun TV sequences were helpfully captioned ADULT in large letters. But most adults would have switched off in disgust because it was all crude in the extreme and so vulgar that it was not even funny. I wondered if these sequences had censor certificates. Many had the name of the song and the film in the left-hand corner. I shuddered to think how many vulnerable young minds had got on to these disgusting after-midnight blue films and what effect it had on them. Were their parents aware of these after-midnight sex festivals on India-based satellite channels?

Are the people who criticise foreign satellite channels for indecent exposure, aware of the obscene song-and-dance sequences regularly shown on many Indian TV channels?

And what about the morally-outraged people who are bringing obscenity charges against the so-called foreign invaders of India? Are they aware of these obscene song-and-dance sequences which seem routine fare on many Indian TV channels? Are they ignoring them merely because they are telecast after midnight? May I suggest to the defence lawyers of foreign channels accused of obscenity to tape the blue sequences telecast on Indian TV channels and ask the judges to decide which are more obscene? The western ones which operate under their own morality codes or the Indian ones which are flouting all the moral values of this nation?

And have the Indian censors, passed some of the obscene song-and-dance sequences from films that one gets to see on TV? I cannot believe that Indian censor laws can permit such sequences and it is time a second look was taken at them. Better still, people anxious to guard Indian viewers from pornographic onslaughts should also file public interest litigations against Indian channels which are openly flouting Indian cultural traditions. I would like to remind these channels that Sushma Swaraj of the BJP, in her brief tenure as minister for information and broadcasting, had come down heavily on certain ads on Indian TV, such as the Videocon one with the skirt flying up. Compared with what is being shown on ATN and Sun TV, that billowing skirt is child's play.

After the next elections it is not only Prasar Bharati which will be in for review. But hopefully, the lack of moral codes or the lack of their enforcement (which are so blatantly being proved on these Indian channels) will also come up for re-examination. •

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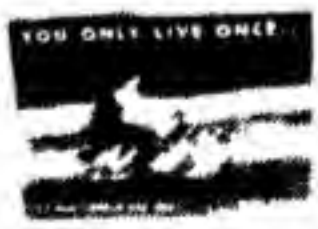

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Curtain

1997 has been a significant year for the Indian theatre enthusiast. The excitement over new plays opening to packed houses, big names giving mindblowing performances, outstanding scripts fetching awards from abroad — there were plenty of reasons to cheer about.

Here's a review of the events, achievements and the trends that dominated the theatre scene last year.

The golden jubilee of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the group which pioneered theatre activity in the country, was celebrated with a difference. The difference lay in the selection of the venue.

A festival of plays was held in Begusarai, a small district in Bihar, beginning on 23 November. Among the participants were 53 branches of the Bihar chapter of the IPTA and theatre veterans ike Kaifi Azmi.

The five-day festival which saw streets doubling up as stages, will be remembered especially for two reasons. One, it showed that lovers of theatre never mind the distance. And two, the ecstatic audience response proved once again that 1997 has been a good year for Indian theatre.

This was a year when playwriting became popular and came to be appreciated. The landmark event was, of course, Manjula Padmanabhan's winning the Onassis foundation award for her play — *Harvest*. The play is set in Bombay of 2010 AD and traces the so-called First World exploitation of the less-developed nations of the world. It's about the life of a man who trades his vital organs to secure a comfortable future for his family. An overflowing house listened to the play-reading session in Delhi — a fact which augurs well for theatre in India in all its dynamic forms.

1997 also witnessed a surge of talent in different areas of theatre activity. Feisal Alkazi of Ruchika, a theatre group based in Delhi, is very pleased with the growing number of young enthusiasts. "There are many more younger directors, more artistes looking for Indian roots and a surge in 'dramatic literature' — literature part of drama has become very important," he says.

Until recently, a lot of the English plays that were put up on the Indian stage were either adaptations or translations of classical European drama.

Barry John, a veteran of the Indian stage, laments the "lack of original home-grown scripts for English theatre and also the lack of will among the theatrewallahs to do something about it." John, who is well-known for his association with Yatrik and the Theatre Action Group, and runs a training school for theatre enthusiasts called Imago, finds it ridiculous that "Indians [should] call each other Bill, Tom or Adam just because the play is borrowed from the West."

V RAJAGOPAL

"Theatre must be subsidised so that it can reach out to a larger audience," says director Feroz Khan who has tasted box-office success

But now with the arrival of Padmanabhan and the success of Mahesh Dattani (his *Dance Like a Man* and *Tara* did very well in India and abroad), more and more writers are becoming interested.

In fact, there is a palpable change in the theatre scene in Bombay, notwithstanding the glut of bedroom farces that dominates it. Socially relevant themes are in. *Get Off My Back* looks at the hardships of a Girgaum widow who tackles adolescent children and greedy landlords. *I'm Not Bajirao* focusses on the pro-

call

In 1997, theatre enthusiasts had a lot to cheer about

***Mahatma vs Gandhi* with Naseeruddin Shah in the title role was showing to packed houses. Tickets were priced at an exorbitant Rs 1,000. But many would have paid more to secure a seat**

blems suffered by the old in urban India. *If Wishes Were Horses* examines the class and caste differences in an otherwise classless Bombay city. *Dance Like a Man* explores the link between art and society.

Rahul DaCunha, director of the hugely successful *I'm Not Bajirao* is happy that at last English playwriting has found focus. "Problems with Indian theatre have been simplified with theatre concentrating on plays for Indians, by Indians and about India ... it cannot be strictly called English theatre any more — rather it is Indian English theatre now, not mere English adaptations," says DaCunha, adding, "We have Indians writing in English theatre or expatriate Indians writing. This is a turning point in English theatre this year."

As far as Hindi playwriting goes, the flag has been kept flying high. Recently, the Sahitya Kala Parishad bestowed the Mohan Rakesh Samman on three playwrights — Kunal for his play *Barbaric Uvaach*, Gopal Dutta for *Mathurapuri Ki Vaarta* and Rajesh Ganodwale for *Harish Kumar Amit*.

Rarely has the Indian stage seen so much variety and talent as it was in the last year. There were all sorts — from the experimental to the popular *masala* type. And the response, in most cases, was overwhelming.

The Prithvi festival held in November last year was a treat for theatre afficionados. Twentysix groups participated from all over the country. Besides getting the best of Indian theatre to the city, the festival threw up certain interesting trends. Six of the plays were based on interpretations of the Mahabharata, ten were directed by women and five were monologues.

The festival made it clear that there was a market for experimental theatre. *Tumhari Amrita* starring Shabana Azmi and Farooq Sheikh and directed by Feroz Khan was a favourite even after a run of five years on stage. There are just two characters in the play who read out letters they wrote to one another over 40 years.

Khan treated theatre lovers to two other plays — both of which have been received well. *Saalgirah* (starring Kiron and Anupam Kher) is about a couple who are on the verge of divorce, yet decide to celebrate their 15th wedding anniversary as a joke. This play was performed as supper theatre — the audience saw the play over dinner.

But the talking point was, obviously, *Mahatma vs Gandhi* which tries to look at the father underneath the persona of the father of the nation. The controversial play starring Naseeruddin Shah, opened to packed houses. Perhaps for the first time in the history of theatre in our country, the tickets were priced very high — at Rs 1000, 750 and 500. But many would have paid more to secure a seat.

But one Naseeruddin Shah does not make a theatre season. As his wife and fellow thespian Ratna Pathak Shah points out, "Star appeal may work initially but ultimately, the play stands on its own merit."

Funds are a perpetual source of worry for most theatre groups. "Even if you are involved and committed to theatre, it is next to impossible for a group to thrive because of the mounting costs of production which may run into lakhs of rupees a day," says Barry John.

Even Feroz Khan, who has tasted box-office success, feels "theatre must be subsidised so that it can reach out to a larger audience."

With most groups unable to cover their costs, corporate sponsorships (provided one is lucky enough to secure them, given that theatre does not have the glamour of films) have become a necessity.

But the going is not always easy. Feroz Khan had to turn down a prospective sponsor who came to attend rehearsals "because his ignorance proved to be more powerful than my talent".

But then, when has money (or the lack of it) come in the way of people with a strong will to perform? •

Pallavi Ghosh/New Delhi with Kaajal Walia/Bombay

The right choice?

Azharuddin's appointment as captain questions the selectors' wisdom

Consider the scenario. As many as six players are axed in what the selectors termed as a step towards building the world cup squad for 1999. A short while thereafter, a few are re-inducted. Vinod Kambli goes on a tour as bystander and then is told to pack his bags without getting a chance to prove himself. Rahul Dravid is considered the most technically competent batsman in the country, "but wouldn't fit into a limited-overs Indian eleven" according to the Board of Control for Cricket in India secretary. Finally, Rajesh Chauhan is shown the door because an ICC executive feels he "chucks" instead of bowling.

So much for the mix-and-match composition. Mohammad Azharuddin was ticked off at length by the selectors for his alleged lack of commitment to the team. Some felt his impetuosity was actually a reflection of his waning form while others attributed it to his resentment over being deposed from captaincy.

Instead of being warned that it was his last opportunity to stay in the team, Azhar was named captain. Surely, that ended all talks of looking ahead. The step invited fresh allegations of bribery: a scandal that has dogged the player for some time now. The selectors were caught on the wrong foot when questioned about the captain and the composition of the team.

Sachin Tendulkar's case was by far the most inexplicable. The youngster had captaincy thrust on him because the selectors wanted to "teach the swollen-headed Azharuddin a lesson". There were, in fact, too many allegations against Azhar at the time for the selectors to ignore. The upshot was that Tendulkar had to take on the responsibility before he was ready for it.

Ever since, he had been walking a tightrope. The authorities never really trusted his abilities. In all his 17 months of leadership, never was total confidence reposed in him. The selectors appointed him purely on a piecemeal basis. Always being on trial naturally affected his own game.

Sachin was never given the free hand he deserved. In this context, the debate over whether or not the captain should be allowed to choose his team requires an urgent solution. Since the captain's views are not binding on the selectors at present, the naming of the leader before the rest of the team is of little consequence.

SANTOSH GHOSH

Azharuddin: luck smiles again

Instead of being warned that it was his last opportunity to stay in the team, Azhar was named captain. The step invited fresh allegations of bribery: a scandal that has dogged him for some time now

Actually, the role of the captain has never been qualified. If he is to work in tandem with the selectors, he should be given a clear brief. In the absence of such directives, one has seen Azhar caring little for his teammates both on and off the field and Tendulkar ignoring the bowling options given to him as well as juggling the batting order to the detriment of his team's chances in a match.

Left-arm spinner Rahul Sanghvi has replaced Chauhan, the off-spinner who was in very good form. The BCCI cannot say why it should heed the ICC's advice when Chauhan has not been no-balled by the umpires. Both Gavaskar and Kapil had okayed his action. So did all the umpires officiating in the matches he played.

All eyes will be focused on Azhar when he leads India into the Independence Cup tournament in Bangladesh. With so much controversy over his alleged connection with bookies — which obviously has not been proved — and his aloofness, the big question is whether he is the right choice to lead India to the next world cup. The Dhaka matches along with the series against Australia and the three-way competition including Zimbabwe, should be able to answer that query.

Wasim Akram has taken a different line. With persistent rumours about his involvement in betting, he has opted out of the captaincy race. That has made his case stronger than Azhar's, to say the least. •

Arijit Sen/Calcutta

INDER MALHOTRA

Defenceless

Why are Indians so ignorant of the role played by the armed forces?

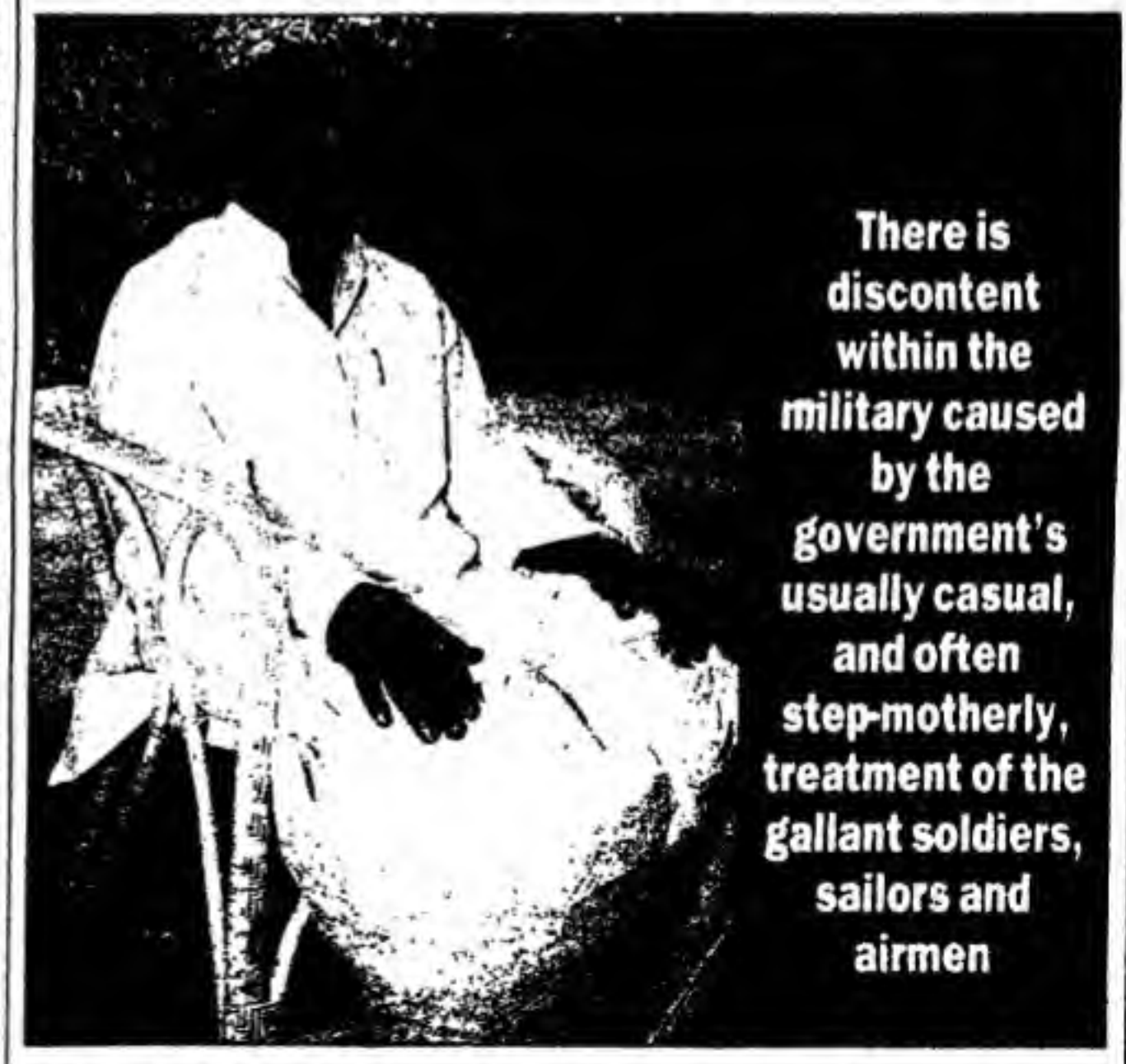
At the turn of the year the South Block — especially that half of it which is responsible for the country's defence — was alarmingly remiss in dealing with the discontent within the military caused by the government's usually casual, and often stepmotherly, treatment of the gallant soldiers, sailors and airmen. In all fairness, the fault is not of the government alone. The civilian society as a whole is largely and shockingly ignorant of the armed forces' role in a democracy and utterly indifferent to their needs.

Indeed, I know of no country where the political class as well as the chattering elite are so disinterested in, if not disdainful of, national security. Nor is there a single country of any consequence where top military leaders are so aloof from the government and content to be operational commanders of the respective services. The civilians are, of course, culpable for this sorry state of affairs but the military leadership cannot escape its share of blame.

It is incomprehensible why both the defence ministry and the air headquarters were unaware of the intensity and the extent of the feelings in the air force that eventually erupted into the most unseemly agitation, by proxy (making wives take to the streets or directly, as in Bhuj, where airmen went on a rampage). But anyone who believes that similar resentments do not exist in the other two services, which have mercifully maintained their ethos of disciplined functioning, is living in a make-believe world.

It should also be understood that the current situation has not developed overnight. It is the result of the mishandling of the legitimate demands and sentiments of the armed forces over a long time. An educated soldiery draws its own conclusions from the self-seeking machinations and manipulations of senior officers.

The plethora of court cases filed by officers of even the rank of lieutenant-general or its equivalent in the matter of promotions and postings bespeaks of a breakdown of faith in the fairness of the selection process and the efficacy of the established machinery for the redressal of grievances. To this litigation has now been added the petition of the ground duty staff of the IAF who have indeed been treated shabbily by a government acting in haste under pressure and then repenting at leisure.

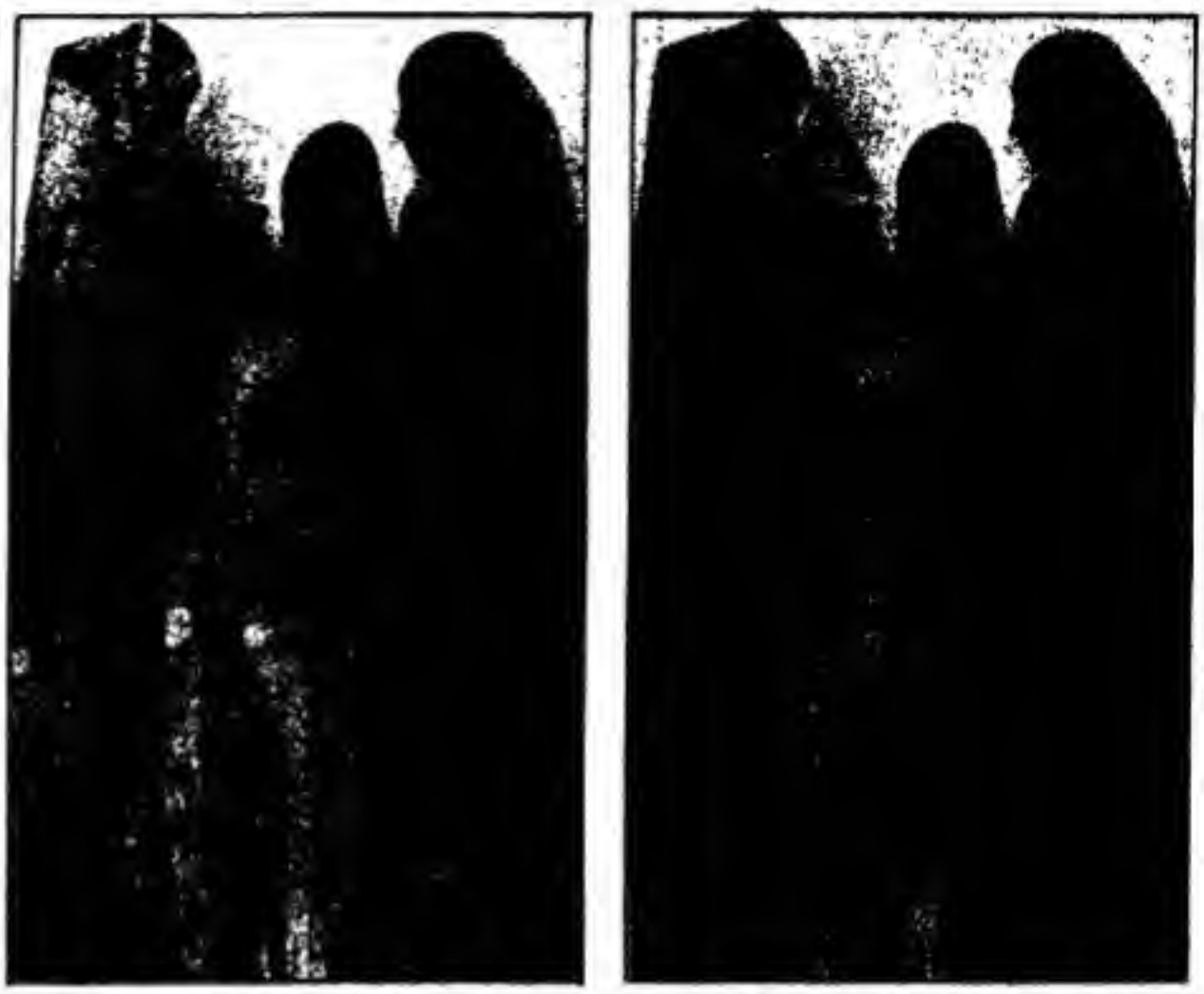


Mulayam Singh Yadav: finally breaking his silence on the agitation by the ground duty staff of the IAF

On the penultimate day of 1997, the defence minister, Mulayam Singh Yadav, broke his long silence on the subject and blandly announced that the most distressing display of indiscipline in the IAF was the "result of a conspiracy". There was in his remarks also a hint of the "foreign hand". If this is so, then drastic measures should have been taken by now to root out the mischief and award exemplary punishment to the authors of treachery. But all Yadav has promised is that an inquiry will be held "soon", with the help of the Intelligence Bureau and the "conspirators" will be "exposed".

Several far-reaching measures will have to be taken to deal with the mess we have made. In the first place, the need for an integrated, well-coordinated machinery for decision-making on defence and national security has got to be set up. It matters little whether it is called the National Security Council or something else. An integration of the ministry of defence and the services headquarters is also overdue. And the folly of leaving the pay and working conditions of the defence services to a civilian pay commission must have become clear even to the meanest intelligence. •

INTACH joins hands with the National Gallery of Modern Art to break fresh grounds in the field of art restoration



***Hill Women* (1935) by Amrita Shergill, before (left) and after restoration**

Amrita Shergill would often apply a second coat of paint before the previous one had dried. Flaking and chipping of paints is common in her works

TRUE CO

Flaking canvas, chipped colours, shrinkage marks, discolouration, misty portfolio that's the state much of our art heritage is in these days. Wouldn't it have been wonderful to have someone clear away the cobwebs that have accumulated over the years? Wouldn't it be a rewarding experience for the public if they got to see some of our most cherished paintings in their true colours?

Conservation of India's priceless paintings and art objects are very high on the agenda of The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH). Its dedicated team of experts could be seen pouring laboriously over each painting, trying to decipher the artist's feelings obscured by time and years of neglect. Paintings are thoroughly scanned to ensure that the basic structure and impressions left by the artists are not tampered with. INTACH is one organisation which goes about the job of restoring India's art heritage with a missionary zeal.

Come 9 January, 1998, INTACH in association with National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) will be holding an exhibition entitled Ravi Varma-Shergill-Restored. As the name suggests, a rare collection of paintings by Raja Ravi Varma and Amrita Shergill will be on display. Most of these have been restored. Some have not been touched up because one, they cannot be and two, because the organisers felt this was a way of showing the viewers "how much of a difference restoration does to a painting which has deteriorated over time".

Compare the restored painting with its photograph prior to restoration. It is only the colours which have muted with time and age or got chipped that have been retouched. Not even shrinkage marks have been touched up.

Interestingly, the two artists whose works are being curated belong to different worlds — generically and stylistically. Which is no surprise considering they had different backgrounds and belonged to different time-frames.

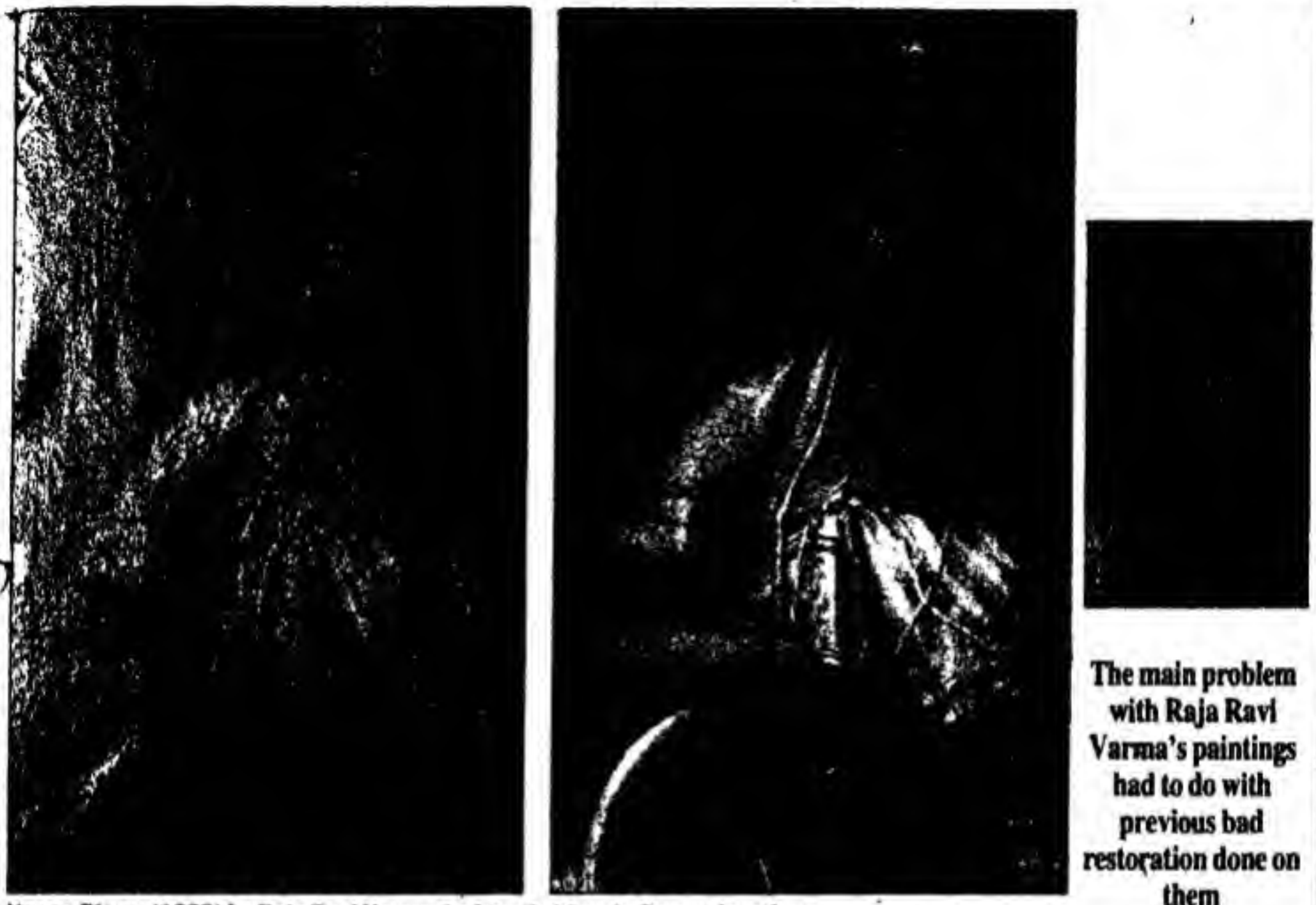
Varma (1848-1906) came from a traditional Keralite family. He was patronised by the royalty and embodied a classical Indian style of painting. Shergill (1913-41) was brought up in the West and trained in modern western art form. While Varma looked towards the West in his quest for modernity, Shergill's paintings reveal a yearning for striking roots in India.

Yet the differences between the two complement each other. Both are highly valued and appreciated abroad as back at home. Both introduced a novel art form which the traditionalists often found fault with.

Thanks to NGMA and INTACH, today the two pathbreakers have come together, their works hanging side by side — looking fresh and radiant as they deserve to be. For those curious to find out the nitty-gritty of how it all came about, here's the inside story.

Detecting the flaw and the source of decay was the most challenging part of the job. In fact, more time was spent on unriddling the extent of damage done to the painting than the actual restoration work. Of course, modern scientific aids helped. Detailed micro-sections, analysis of the chemical composition of pigments, use of ultraviolet fluorescents and special surveillance cameras enabled the restorers to identify the grey areas.

The nature of damage was different in each case, which called for a difference



Veena Player (1885) by Raja Ravi Varma, before (left) and after restoration

The main problem with Raja Ravi Varma's paintings had to do with previous bad restoration done on them

LOURS

in treatment. "The main problem with Ravi Varma's paintings had to do with previous bad restoration done on them," says Sanjay Dhar of INTACH. "We have spent a lot of time in overcoming the shoddy manner in which the works were redeemed. Considering that Ravi Varma's paintings are very old, there is a lot of yellowing and discolouration of the canvas."

With Shergill the problem is intrinsic to the material, canvas and colours used.

She was a painter in a hurry. A prolific painter, Shergill would finish painting two to three canvases at one go. Often, a second coat of paint would be applied much before the previous one had dried. As a consequence of which flaking and chipping of paints is common in her works. And then, she would use canvases which were uneven in texture. This did add a certain depth to her art but again caused the colours to chip on the thick weaves of the canvas.

Sukanta Basu, veteran restorer who has been associated with the NGMA and INTACH, and has redeemed countless works by eminent painters is very pleased with the results. Basu, who helped to put the exhibition together and organised the viewing, considers it to be a triumph of sorts for the team of restorers.

"Any specialised work you do, takes time to trickle down to the audience and to have an exhibition displaying such works require a lot of confidence," says Basu. "It gives me a lot of pleasure and pride to be able to say to the public through this exhibition that we in INTACH have been able to do so — to salvage damaged paintings."

The exhibition, he feels, is a way of making the public aware of the professional skill of the restorers. "More importantly, the purpose of this exhibition is to reassure the lovers of art that damaged art can be restored," says Basu.

About 30 paintings will be on display at the exhibition, of which 11 were restored by INTACH. Ten paintings put up by the NGMA were restored earlier. "This will give the public an idea as to what a painting looks years after being restored," says Dhar.

What has been heartening for the organisers is the response from private collectors. In fact, the works on display belong mostly to private collections.

Several owners of rare paintings approached INTACH with request for doing something to salvage the decaying pictures. With not much aid available from within the country, it was the Chubb group of insurance companies from the US who supported the efforts of INTACH and NGMA.

Noted painter Vivan Sundaram offered Shergill's painting titled Fruit Vendors for restoration and exhibition. "The

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exhibition is a reflection of the growing concern and interest in restoration and conservation," says Sundaram, enthusiastically. "It will display the scientific intervention in preserving art."

However, restoration of paintings is not something new. In fact, INTACH held its first 'restoration exhibition' in 1990, albeit at a smaller scale. National Museum has been involved in conservation of art for a considerable time under the guidance of Sukanta Basu, who runs

VIVAN SUNDARAM

"The exhibition is a reflection of the growing concern and interest in restoration and conservation. It will display the scientific intervention in preserving art"

a fullfledged course in restoration covering a span of two years.

What makes this exhibition different from the rest is the scale on which it is being done. Sophisticated techniques and equipment have infused the paintings with a fresh lease of life. "When the paintings are cleaned up, you see colours which were earlier missed," supplies Sundaram. "It is nice that the public will be able to share the experience."

To get a feel of the real thing, a sampling of the colours as fresh and vibrant as they were when mixed on the artist's palette — well, what more could today's art connoisseur ask for? •

Pallavi Ghosh/New Delhi

BLITZKRIEG

The dividing line between victory and loss is very often thin. Not in chess. Because then, it becomes a question of how quick you can think. That's what British Grandmaster Michael Adams learnt. Playing Viswanathan Anand in the finals of the Fide World Chess Championship Adams was literally blown off the board in the five-minute sudden-death blitz. Sixty-five moves in roughly 300 seconds — it was more a *blitzkrieg*. Of course, Anand is used to playing fast; he revels in speed.

There's another level to it. In a world where speed barriers are becoming obsolete, it's mutant chess that we see if you consider its modern-day terminology: tie-breaker, sudden death, five-minute blitz. Probably, 'Lightning Kid' Anand is a mutant himself. He plays Anatoly Karpov now for the world crown.

Anand (right) against Adams: how fast is fast

AFP

THE BERI LINE

It must be fun being Ritu Beri. One, she is a stunner, and looks go a long way in her line. And second, when it comes to being innovative, she is way ahead of her ilk. Beri's latest foray, 'commitment to be fit', is in the world of sports, where she collaborates with Planet Pulse, the international chain, and Ajay Bijli of Anupam PVR, India's first cine multiplex.

In a way it's a *double entendre*. Beri is the first Indian couturier to explore designer sportswear. That's fair enough unless you want to be stodgy. But at a deeper level — and that's purely from the point of view of Adidas or Proline — it borders on the risque. Fashion-design is okay, but why sports? Unless she wants to make a spectacle of sportsmen.

Beri: hold that pose!

STRAINS OF HURT

Pan an artiste, reject him, but never ignore him. That would amount to a deliberate slight, and artistes don't take kindly to slights. Especially someone like Debu Chaudhuri.

Chaudhuri is hurt because despite the Padma Bhushan and the recent Akademy award which he received on 26 December, his contribution in the field of sitar has gone unnoticed.

It's valid anger: playing in an atmosphere where comparisons with Ravi Shankar are inevitable, carving a niche isn't easy. But Debu has done this nonetheless, authoring two books on sitar and creating seven new *ragas*. After all, not many have their debut performance at 13.

Chaudhuri: carving a niche

V RAJAGOPAL

BEING BORIS

There was a time when tennis was more of a mind-game. Remember Borg? The dark, remorseless sorcerer who played with a wooden racket? That was pre-1985, before a brash, young rebel called Boris brought a bit of 'body' into the game. 'Boom Boom', they called him, and tennis was on a roll. Now 13 years on, the German 'superego' will be in India in April for the Gold Flake Open.

For the first time and, most probably, the last. Becker has already hinted that he will be quitting the sport soon. At thirty — and after six Grand Slams — there isn't much left for him in the game. Or maybe, he is just disillusioned. Even your most favourite things can become a drag after a point.

Becker: last of the Titans

THE COLOUR OF GREEN

When it comes to environmental pollution,hotels are usually the worst offenders.Not Maurya Sheraton, New Delhi.

Here's the latest update: apart from being the first hotel in Asia to get serious about environment and actually doing something about it, it organised an 'Envirocarnival' where stalls selling and popularising eco-friendly products were set up.

That's just one aspect. Maurya has also set up a recycling plant where all kitchen and laundry waste water is recycled for use in gardens and

washing. The hotel also uses recycled paper for in-house stationary needs. So when it won the International Hotels and Restaurant Environmental Award for 1997, earning Maurya the tag of a 'Green Hotelier', it was a well-deserved recognition.

Postscript: if even one person started thinking about Planet Earth, the carnival served its purpose.

ANDHRA PRADESH

Eye for an eye

Violence in rural Telengana queers the pitch for the TDP in the run-up to the polls

The first major conference organised by the outlawed Peoples War Group (PWG), under the aegis of the All India Peoples Resistance Forum (AIPRF), at Warangal recently, focussed on 'state repression' in the villages of Andhra Pradesh and voiced the 'hopes and aspirations' of the Telengana region. The timing of the meet — the first major assembly of extremist elements since the Ryotu-Coolie-Sangham meeting in 1990 — enhanced its political significance. The Congress(I) and the BJP are busy chalking out special poll plans for Telengana in view of the ruling Telugu Desam Party's (TDP) failure to bring "peace and progress" to the region.

The AIPRF meet at Warangal drew extremist sympathisers by the hordes. They blockaded the town and paralysed normal life for one whole day. Coming in the wake of incessant violence in the rural areas, and months before the Lok Sabha elections, it sounded a clear warning to the establishment which is struggling to establish administrative control over the areas dominated by the Naxals.

The battle for Telengana has intensified ever since N. Chandrababu Naidu chose to reinforce the ban on the PWG. With the CM giving extensive 'anti-extremist' powers to the police force, the Naxals hit back with a vengeance. So 'encounter' killings on the one hand, and landmine blasts and ambushes on the other, have become the order of the day.

The police and state home ministry have even resorted to floating such outfits as the Green Tigers, Kranti Sena and Praja Bandhu to counter the extremists at the grass-roots level. Incidentally, the Kranti Sena had threatened to bomb the venue of the AIPRF meeting.

Even while ordering a severe crack-down on the extremists, the TDP government has stepped up efforts to mobilise public opinion in the troubled villages. The Naidu administration has promised ex-gratia payment to the families of those killed in extremist violence and announced a 'prize money' for the extremists at large. "If these extremist leaders surrender, the prize money against their name is given as compensation to them to start a new life," reveals the Karimnagar SP, C. Anjaneyulu.

The violence in rural Andhra has attracted the attention of human rights bodies throughout the country. According to the Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC), headed by retired IAS official S.R. Shankaran, nearly 900 people, belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other backward classes, had been killed between 1990-96 by the police in "fake encounters". And the extremists had killed over a thousand to "settle the score".

Both the CCC and the AIPRF have urged the state government to take the initiative in putting an end to the bloody battle and restoring normalcy to the troubled areas. But most human rights bodies have also been critical of the role of the extre-

MIGHT IS RIGHT: *a PWG Praja Court in progress (above); and the aftermath of extremist violence*

RED ALERT: *police patrol a 'sensitive' area*

mists. "We appeal to both the government and the extremists to put an end to indiscriminate violence in the villages and killing of innocents in their battle for supremacy," says S.R. Sankaran.

The magnitude of the problem can only be gauged from a visit to the villages plagued by fear. Most villages in the strife-torn districts wear a deserted look, as some have fled to nearby towns, others to the state capital. They have chosen the misery of urban slums over the insecurity of their rural homes. "Those who have not migrated, have sought the shelter of the extremists or the police," observes a human rights activist in Hyderabad.

The Chandrababu Naidu government has blamed the extremist movement for all the ills in the Telengana region. And the chief minister even told the World Bank as much. He said the extremists were running an extortion racket and so "industrialists were running away from the region".

"The government is contradicting itself when it says that the extremists are collecting nearly Rs 100 crore per annum from the contractors and that no new industries have come up in the last two decades in the region," comments a political observer.

But the fact is that the government vs extremist stand-off has put paid to any chances of development, any hopes of progress, in Telengana. Nearly 53 to 70 per cent of the cultivable land in the region is lying fallow.

"Agricultural wealth has been wasted in the region and the PWG cannot be blamed for that," feels APCLC general secretary K. Balagopal. The PWG has been campaigning for mega irrigation and industrial projects in the region. "What we find wrong in the PWG operation is their campaign against polls and their coercion of elected representatives," adds Balagopal.

The extremists are ready to play a powerful, disruptive role in pockets of Andhra Pradesh. And the state forces are hell-bent on thwarting their moves. With the battle-lines clearly drawn, a violent run-up to the general elections is very much on the cards in Andhra Pradesh, especially in Telengana. •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

BIHAR

Action stations

The state administration gears up to combat Naxalites and private armies

The law-and-order situation in Bihar has come in for close scrutiny, at both the state and national levels, in the wake of the Laxmanpur Bathe massacre. On 1 December, 61 villagers of Batan Tola had been butchered by members of the Ranvir Sena. Following the carnage, the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), the CPI(ML)-Party Unity and CPI(ML)-Liberation have threatened to form a united front and take on the Ranvir Sena. There is just over a month to go for the Lok Sabha polls and more than 60 per cent of booths are likely to be declared 'sensitive'. Simply put, the situation in Bihar, and especially the Jehanabad region, is explosive.

The dreaded MCC has set the tone by calling for a "poll boycott". But the Party Unity's stand on the election is ambiguous. "We are going to maintain a neutral stand on the Lok Sabha election," says Comrade Arjun Singh. "We are neither going to boycott it, nor participate in it." But the unit made its intentions clear by blowing up the Arwal block office and torching another one at Ratni-Faridpur, some 15 kms from the district headquarters of Jehanabad on the night of 29 December.

Some residents of Ratni-Faridpur told SUNDAY: "At least 200, heavily-armed PU members surrounded the block-office and the Panchayat Bhavan. They broke open the doors and set the buildings ablaze using petrol bombs. Before departing, amidst a volley of shots fired in the air, they left a note stating that this was to protest the detention of innocent people by the state police."

The police have launched a "massive operation" to counter Naxals as well as private armies in Bihar. The state

EYE-OPENER: *the Laxmanpur Bathe massacre*

administration is giving top priority to law and order. Last week, chief electoral officer (CEO) A.K. Basu convened a meeting of senior administrative and police officials to review the poll preparation in 18 Naxal-infested districts of Bihar.

Sources in the election commission admit that the Naxals are running a parallel government of sorts in Jehanabad, Aurangabad, Hazaribagh, Palamu, Chatra, Garhwa, Dumka, Giridih, Gaya, Nawada, Rohtas, Bhabhua, Nalanda, Patna, Sahebganj, Banka, Lohardagga, Siwan and Godda.

That the state government is tackling the issue on a war-footing became clear when finance minister Shankar Prasad Tekriwal announced that more than Rs 40 crore have been sanctioned to strengthen the state police force.

According to Tekriwal, an additional Gorkha battalion will be raised. Rs 3.62 crore has already been allocated for this, over and above the Rs 5.21 crore needed for its infrastructure. In a bid to improve the mobility of its police force, the govern-

TASK FORCE: *the police in Patna*

ment has already placed an order for 65 jeeps, 32 Maruti Gypsys and Tata-407s at a cost of Rs 4.33 crore. Fifty-four new 'prison vans' are being purchased at a cost of Rs 2.93 crore and Rs 3.15 crore has been earmarked for the fire-brigade department. Rs 6 crore has also been sanctioned for the construction of pucca buildings for 22 thanas.

Out of a Rs 6.37 crore-grant for the financial year 1997-98, Rs 6.21 crore has already been released for the purchase of sophisticated weapons. The police have already purchased 1,093 pistols and will be receiving 1,084 carbines. Some 6.84 lakh rounds of ammunition for self-loading rifles (SLRs) are on their way. The Centre has okayed the allotment of hand-grenades, SLRs, AK-47s, pistols and a huge consignment of ammunition. The state government had recently sent three different teams to the BSF Training Centres at Tekanpur in Madhya Pradesh, Tirurchirapally in Tamil Nadu and Calcutta to collect the arms and ammunition. A truckload of 400 wireless sets and other modern communication gadgets has also arrived.

According to R.K. Singh, the newly-appointed home commissioner, his department is assessing the requirement of paramilitary forces essential in order to conduct "free and fair" elections in the "sensitive" districts of Bihar. So far, 26 companies of paramilitary forces from different parts of the country have arrived in the state. Union home secretary B.P. Singh has assured the state home department that 50 such companies could be deployed in Bihar.

But the crack-down has drawn considerable flak from the ultra-Left. The police are said to be hostile towards the Naxals and sympathetic towards their rivals. The All India Peoples Resistance Forum (AIPRF) has decried the police action against innocent landless labourers in the villages of Bihar. "What the police in Bihar are doing is what K.P.S. Gill's police force had done in Punjab," AIPRF president Darshan Pal told SUNDAY, on a recent visit to Patna. "The situation is the same in J & K and Assam. The police are hauling up innocent villagers and throwing them in jail on trumped-up charges," he added.

According to Pal, the elections will serve no real purpose. "Within a year, three Prime Ministers have come and gone. The political situation is critical and elections are not the solution. People feel alienated and they just watch the political *tamasha*."

But with the anti-establishment forces in Bihar threatening to do much more than "just watch" and the state administration determined to fight it out, the pre-poll scenario in Bihar looks ominous. •

Naved Zahir/Patna

Silent supper

Elephants in West Bengal welcome a High Court ruling

If elephants could say 'thank you', herds would surely come trumpeting to Justice Bhagawati Prasad Banerjee to express their gratitude. The Calcutta High Court judge's ruling restricting sound levels to a tolerable 65 decibels has brought cheer to elephants in West Bengal's Purulia district. But the villagers are in tears, if not already up in arms.

So, what makes the elephants happy? Well, the good judge's order has banned the bursting of crackers to drive back herds frequently straying into agricultural fields and occasionally into habitations. Elephants are therefore having a glorious time, feasting on ripening paddy and turning tipsy on *haoria*, the famous tribal rice-beer.

Purulia is a dry, mono-crop area with rejuvenating forest tracts running along its borders with two other districts of West Bengal (Midnapore and Bankura) and one of Bihar. These jungles, which have regained much of their lustre in the last few years and stretch up to Bihar's Dalma hills, are home to a growing herd that embarks on seasonal migration. And the perambulating creatures, forever foraging to energise their giant bodies, find crops irresistible. As a nippy autumn replaces a sapping monsoon and paddy fields turn from green to golden, elephant families venture

WEST BENGAL

Difference of opinion

The state government is in a fix over extending panchayati raj to tea gardens

The West Bengal government is in a fix over the inclusion of the tea gardens into the panchayat system following differences of opinion between the CPI(M)'s Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri district committee members. While the CPI(M) leaders of Darjeeling are favouring the inclusion of the gardens, the Jalpaiguri leaders believe that it would lead to anarchy in the tea gardens and hamper production.

The state secretariat of the party, which wanted to resolve the issue before the panchayat polls likely to be held this year, had called leaders of both district committees to its headquarters at Alimuddin Street, Calcutta, for discussions. But no decision could be taken.

Surya Kanta Mishra, state panchayat and rural development minister, however, said that the 73rd constitutional amendment in 1992 had put an obligation on the state governments to bring all rural areas under panchayats. Mishra had

FUTURE TENSE: *a tea garden in north Bengal*

held a meeting with representatives of the tea associations in Calcutta in October, 1997.

Some of them, like the Darjeeling Planters' Association (DPA), Dooars Branch Indian Tea Association (DBITA), Tea Association of India, etc., consider the inclusion to be detrimental to their interests. "Tea garden managements are providing many welfare measures under statutes like Plantation Labour Act of 1951, and there should not be any duplication of these under the panchayat system," said Dilip Moitra, secretary of the DBITA.

out to take part in what they consider, and perhaps rightfully so, to be their annual food festival.

Earlier, watchful villagers would do all they legally could to shoo away the animals. They would yell from treetops, bang empty metal cans, light fires and, when everything else failed, set off booming crackers. That usually helped. But no more. The Calcutta High Court has forbidden the big bang, and so its advantage: elephants.

"We are farming for elephants," says Ludhu Mandi, angry that he has lost half a bigha of crops from the four he had sown. His land sustains his family of five for six months in years of good harvest. But when some of it is eaten up by elephants, Ludhu feels his blood-pressure rising.

ELEPHANT COUNTRY: *a member of the herds that keep moving between Midnapore and Purulia*

The elephants have a taste for paddy, *arahar* and corn, and Ludhu says that the last season was a particularly bad one. Elephants are causing more damage these days, he maintains and demands a fair compensation for his loss. In the whole of Purulia district, crops worth a couple of lakhs are believed to have been lost since October.

Besides, without the aid of crackers, it takes much longer to drive away the herds these days, and people employed in driving operations by the forest department are demanding compensation for the extra effort. A driving exercise could last for 24 hours but villagers are being paid only for a day's, or eight hours', work. Forest officials admit that this is unfair, but say they are helpless in the absence of government rules.

The villagers have their own suggestions to get round the problem. Some feel that elephants should be fenced off and confined to the forests. Others stress better irrigation facilities that could ensure more than one crop a year. "Even if one is damaged, we'll have a second or a third crop to fall back on," says Ludhupada. That, he feels, would ease the presently rising tension caused by elephant depredation.

Yet another view is that additional sources of income should be provided to absorb the financial shock caused by [illegible]. If people living near forests were to become less dependent on agriculture, both man and [illegible] would search for a peaceful coexistence.

But right now, the mood is sullen as hungry people watch their crops disappear to yet another gargantuan [illegible]

FOR THE MOTION: *Surya Kanta Mishra (left) and Ashoke Bhattacharya*

"Implementation of the panchayat system must carefully avoid encroaching upon the administrative prerogatives of the gardens' managements which must be exercised," asserted D.N. Banerjee, manager of the Taipoo tea garden in the Terai region of Darjeeling district.

"Panchayat schemes should be ideally located outside the periphery of tea gardens which could be taken advantage of by the unemployed or by the dependents of tea garden workers," suggested DPA secretary Ranen Dutta.

Kanaiah Lal, manager of the Gopal Dhara Tea Estate, said, "The proposed move has tremendous potential to damage the tea industry in West Bengal."

The CPI(M)'s Darjeeling district committee members view the introduction of panchayati raj in the hills' tea gardens as an opportunity to regain the ground it had lost during the GNLF movement and after the formation of the breakaway Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxists (CPRM).

"Most of the family members of the tea labourers do not work in the gardens, and their number is much more than the employed work-force. Who will take care of them? This is precisely where the role of the panchayat comes in. They will be entitled to get the benefits of the different rural employment schemes which, at present, are not available in the garden areas. And these are mainly meant for the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe people," asserted R.B. Rai, CPRM leader and MP.

Some CPI(M) cadres in Darjeeling also feel that the inclusion of the tea gardens in the panchayats "will help create pockets of influence over the hills and counter the GNLF". Ashoke Bhattacharya, state minister of municipal affairs and urban development, reportedly favours the Darjeeling district committee's stand.

However, Manik Bandopadhyay, secretary of the Jalpaiguri district committee, is said to have argued against the issue. "We do not have any objection to grass-roots democracy, but there will be much trouble in the tea industry that will affect the Indian economy. And if democracy does not help development, what's it for?" said a party worker in Jalpaiguri.

Some of the garden managers agree that welfare schemes run by the gardens at present are not always up to the mark. These include free housing, electricity (partly), firewood, medicines, subsidised ration, seasonal clothing, children's primary education, family-planning measures, etc. But they argue that "maintaining all these facilities by panchayats will not be feasible, as that would involve a lot of expenditure which the state government may not be in a position to bear".

Workers themselves are not too sure about how the system will work. "We have seen the miserable conditions of the people living in the panchayat areas of this district," said a member of the CITU-affiliated Cha Bagan Mazdoor Union of the Totapara tea garden in Jalpaiguri. Some of his INTUC counterparts, too, do not favour the inclusion. But the Adivasi Kalyan Samiti, a wing of the Jharkhand Party, is all for the extension of panchayat benefits to the gardens.

"If at all the panchayat system is introduced in the tea gardens, it will not be possible to undertake projects under the Employment Assistance Scheme, Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, etc., as the tea-garden lands cannot be used for any purpose other than tea plantation," remarked a worker. This apprehension was expressed by many in the Dooars. •

"We want the tea gardens to be integrated with the panchayat system. But for that, the Centre should amend the Plantation Labour Act. The amendment Bill is pending for the last four years," said Chandrachud Dasgupta, secretary of the INTUC-affiliated Tea Board Workmen's Association, Calcutta. •

Ashis Basu/Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri

NAGALAND

Clean-up drive

Charged with drug trafficking and extortion, the NSCN attempts to clear its name and purge Naga society

The ongoing peace talks between the Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) led by Isak Chishi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah, has reached a stage where one could "optimistically hope for a permanent solution" of the five-decade-old Indo-Naga political problem.

While stating this, the Government of the People's Republic of Nagaland's (GPRN) Chaplee Kilonser (finance minister), Q. Tuccu, warned that "evil forces as usual are out again today to sabotage the ongoing political process". Addressing a joint meeting of the NSCN and the representatives of various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the Naga-inhabited areas, at its Council Headquarters recently, he alleged that "even when the ceasefire is on, the enemy-surrogated forces are trying to disrupt the peace process by multiplying their activities in Dimapur, so that the protocol is broken easily and the political dialogue between India and the Nagas fails miserably".

And some of these "evil forces" are out to malign the NSCN(I-M), claims the deputy minister, ministry of information and publicity, A. Makunga. According to Makunga, totally "false and baseless" charges of "drug-running" are being levelled against the organisation.

Now, in a bid to clear its name and cleanse Naga society, the NSCN has launched a campaign against drug trafficking and corruption, which the outfit identifies as the two primary social evils afflicting the region as a whole.

Recently, the NSCN (I-M) burned huge quantities of contra-

BONFIRE: *drugs being consigned to flames near Dimapur*

band material near Dimapur to mark the opening ceremony of its new programme. Drugs worth more than Rs 2 crore in the international market were consigned to flames in the presence of NGO members, student representatives and media persons.

The contraband, destroyed in an open ground near Dimpaur, had reportedly been seized by the 'Naga Army' during various operations in the state. A simple function was organised to mark the occasion. NSCN cadres in full gear (combat uniforms and sophisticated arms) formed a protective ring around the site. A short prayer service was held. And then, over one-and-a-half-kg of pure heroin, high quality ganja and strips of Relipen tablets (a hot favourite among the younger drug-addicts in this part of the world) went up in flames.

An anti-corruption dimension was lent to the bonfire when several fake documents from the Nagaland Board of School Education, Nagaland University and Motor Vehicles Department were tossed in as well. The 'papers' — seized from various racketeers who were let off with a stern warning — included marksheets, admit cards, driving licences and registration certificates of vehicles.

Speaking on the occasion, A. Makunga declared that the destruction of the drugs and fake documents was meant to show that the NSCN was opposed to drug trafficking and corruption. He said the outfit would continue to fight against the twin evils and deal firmly with anyone indulging in such activities.

While this move by the NSCN has been welcomed by many, one is not sure how the militants will purge Naga society of some other evils, including extortion.

While clarifying the GPRN's financial policy, Q. Tuccu has revealed that the rate of 'loyalty' tax has been reduced from ten per cent to five per cent while service tax has been collected at the rate of 25 per cent per annum. Besides these, nominal business tax and house tax, at the rate of Rs 110 per household per annum, constituted the GPRN'S 'public collection'.

Reacting to the charges of extortion, Tuccu stated that "all kinds of taxes collected forcibly is the handiwork of the enemy and anti-national forces". The 'finance minister' also said that a "very strict code of conduct and proper guidelines" have been imposed in order to maintain the discipline and efficiency of the organisation and safeguard against mismanagement. •

Pradeep Pareek/Dimapur

Multiplicity

Parody is a popular art on TV

Parody is a mean art. But it is also something of a popular national pastime. All variety entertainment shows, on or off stage, amateur or pro, always include items which star the local talent doing their take on Amitabh, or Mithun, or Govinda.

What's more, you can't switch on the set without running into all kinds of take-offs, emitting varying degrees of hilarity. Jaaved Jafferi elevated imitation to such a point that he got to be better than the real thing: if you've been a regular with *Videocon Flashback*, you'll know what we mean.

Then there's Sajid Khan who also does imitations (as in pokes fun at, makes digs at, flings barbs at) of Bollywood celebs. So you laugh alongside, and then you catch yourself saying, hey, but that's in terrible taste.

COPYCAT: *Jaaved Jafferi*

In *Bakeman's Ooh La La*, good taste is not at such a premium. And anyway, Neelam is prettier. Also, she isn't as crude, so we get a few soft-focus imitations of TV shows and stars. Now if only Neelam weren't so convulsed at her own jokes, we might enjoy them more. My point is this: that however funny you might find parodies disguised as performance, the enjoyment is invariably short-lived. Most times, you can't stay the course.

This is what happened to me last week when I tried watching *Rin Ek Do Teen*, Sachin's latest offering on STAR Plus. The programme purports to purvey laughter through parodying famous movies, and it was Ramesh Sippy's *Shakti* on the block.

The episode called itself 'Sakhti' (bah!), and the Amitabh-Dilip Kumar lookalikes did a valiant job of the dialogue-delivery, and the accents. The situation had potential, the lines weren't bad, and the programme was puttering along till, quite by accident, I surfed to a channel which was showing an excerpt of the movie.

There were Amitabh and Smita Patil in full-blooded [illegible] slithering wetly in the rain. I forgot all about the [illegible]. A pale copy will always be a pale copy; the original [illegible] will have them beat everytime. •

SUNDAY WEEK

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 11 JANUARY, 1998

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

Business commitments can limit your leisure time. This is something you've learned to live with, but ever so often you get a reminder and have to be alert. Old fashioned ideas make you furious: persuade those responsible for them that times are changing and they must keep up with the pace.

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

A financial deal will be satisfying. But delay can result in its falling through. Socialising can be restricted if a child is ill or in trouble: take care of him/her. Get your priorities on the right track. Friends may be suspicious of your ways: reassure them that you have other interests.

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

You could feel neglected. Trying to break the social ice will be tough. Friends may be out of town or indisposed when you call them. This may get you thinking you are not wanted. It may be better to let sleeping dogs lie for a while. Those interested only in your money should not be encouraged.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

When your chips are down, you'll find out who your true friends are. Avoid making a financial deal till you are sure of the facts. Take no chances with either friends or strangers. Something may nag you and it'll be hard to find a confidant.

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

Good intentions are not accepted. There has to be more evidence if you are to convince the authorities, or the financial backers, or the workers, all of whom have to sweat it out. Distractions may keep you from relaxing with your friends. There could be a good reason for a lack of enthusiasm.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

Quiet confidence in the future will win you friends. Official support for a financial venture is probable. A property situation can improve. Make new investments or make wiser use of your resources. A stranger may prove to be an interesting guest.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

Know who your enemies are. Business can be tough. If you feel you're being mistreated or exploited, use your intelligence and find out who all are seeking your downfall. Discreet undercover agents can be of help. Getting to know financial facts can put you in command.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

Make the right moves. If duty calls your loved one away, or you have to make a long journey out of town, be philosophic. Someone may try to get you riled by telling smutty tales or making nasty insinuations. Leave them to their own devices.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

Local affairs and social involvement may be taking up far too much of your time and money. A parent may have something salutary to say. More practical demonstration of cash flow problems can come from the bank. You would be well-advised not to take chances with finances or people.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

Try to sort out the sheep from the goats without making mistakes. Just don't be too obvious; instead, try a bit of deception yourself if you find that it helps. Get someone to look into a household problem while you are away from home. Employ domestic help if this makes things easier.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

Promote your interests and improve your public image. If you trade, you should be circumspect. If you lead a conventional life, there is ample scope to enjoy your social position. You may be the centre of attention. That cannot be too bad for someone who has just come out of training.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

An outing with the right people, or to meet the right people, should put you on your best behaviour. Be choosy about with whom you are seen with. You should be feeling satisfied with progress to date. Try a new approach to an old problem. •

HEARD IN NEW DELHI

That's only a movie. We have the real thing: Chacha 420.

A CONGRESS WORKER ON SITARAM KESRI

Laloo Prasad Yadav wooing Chandra Shekhar

Capitalising on the Congress

Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, the Rajasthan chief minister, has announced that he's not going to contest the Lok Sabha election — he will save his energies for the Assembly polls which will be held later this year.

However, he has already made a political reading of the situation in the Congress which the BJP can capitalise on. Shekhawat has told his party with an astounding air of confidence, that the Sonia Gandhi factor will not affect the BJP as much as it will the United Front; and that the BJP should be ready to use the fact that Sonia Gandhi and Sitaram Kesri will clash with each other over the choice of candidates in the elections.

Congressmen who are afraid that they may not get their party's nominations are already floating this idea, hoping to play one leader off against the other. Which is why Congressmen are in an unusually communicative mood these days.

An uncomfortable alliance

The BJP is deeply embarrassed at having been caught out.

There is no doubt that the BJP wanted an alliance with some Dravidian political outfit and that it found the DMK antipathy to north Indian parties too rigid. When talks were held between Jayalalitha and the BJP, it was generally assumed that she might be a better bet than the DMK.

However, even before the BJP had decided what it was going to do, Jayalalitha sprang a surprise on them — by going public with the announcement even before the details of the alliance had been hammered out.

The BJP now was in a fix:

Jayalalithaa embarrassing the BJP

where it had wanted a reasoned alliance, with time to politically explain its reasons, Jayalalitha rode them to a shotgun wedding.

Now the alliance has become the subject of friction with other allies like the Samata Party. The BJP is trying hard to contain the fall out of the alliance with the AIADMK and is wondering if the one seat that it might win in Tamil Nadu is worth it.

Laloo Yadav, who is now saying Chandra Shekhar is his greatest friend, will help the latter in Ballia and has advised him to also contest from the neighbouring Maharajganj, to make sure he wins from two seats.

There was a time when Laloo Yadav would spare no abuse for Chandra Shekhar. But he's had a lot of time to think about things during his nine months in jail. And the moral support from Chandra Shekhar during this period has convinced him that he was wrong about his judgment of the Thakur from Ballia.

Chandra Shekhar is reported to have told his supporters that this is his last election from Ballia — that he's had enough and will not contest from his village again. That remains to be seen. However, he has said 'no' to

CHECK-LIST

International airports: services they offer

Gatwick, England: Has an internet cafe, a restaurant called Planet Hollywood, and a hotline that gives you information, free of cost, on shopping at Gatwick airport.

Schipol, Amsterdam: Among all the shopping malls in The Netherlands, the one at Schipol is open the longest. Is a big draw for passengers and locals alike. Schipol airport also has a casino and a sauna.

Changi, Singapore: A rooftop swimming pool, Karoke lounge, sauna and a putting green...You can actually live in the airport.

Bangkok International, Thailand: Walk into the airport and you can visit a microbrewery pub.

Frankfurt International, Germany: Has a sex shop, a disco and a supermarket — all inside the airport.

The party is over

Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral has a curious problem: he doesn't know what to tell Janata Dal members when they tell him they don't want to contest on the Janata Dal nomination.

In Bihar, particularly, those Janata Dal members who haven't decided whether they are with Laloo Yadav or with Nitish Kumar are doomed to being wiped out. There is no Janata Dal in Bihar now — either you're with Laloo's RJD or with George Fernandes-Nitish Kumar's Samata Party.

Janata Dal members are therefore running helter skelter to do deals quickly — something that Prime Minister Gujral doesn't approve of.

Inder Gujral: caught in a fix

So recently, when Gujral tried to persuade one member of the Bihar Janata Dal to contest from the Janata Dal ticket, the candidate reminded him quietly that the PM was hardly the best qualified to ask people to keep the Janata Dal alive by not allying with anyone — he was seeking help from the Akali Dal in his own seat.

Perhaps, the only thing that was required of Gujral was to name which one of the two the Janata Dal should ally with — Samata or RJD.

The Sikh factor

Former Union finance minister Manmohan Singh has let it be known that he is not going to fight a Lok Sabha election.

The Congress(I) had decided that it would field some Rajya Sabha heavyweights in the Lok Sabha election. The high command had accordingly sought the views of those who might be interested.

Manmohan Singh was approached and had neither said yes nor no. A Delhi seat would have been okay if he had not been a Sikh in the Congress. But no one has forgotten what the Congress did to the Sikhs in 1984 after Mrs Indira Gandhi was assassinated. So Sikhs were getting ready to vote *en masse* for the BJP if the Congress fielded Sikh candidates.

However, that contingency has been avoided by Singh himself. So now the Congress might even get some Sikh votes — because the candidate it fields will be a Hindu.

HEARD IN THE SOUTH BLOCK

Our minister has a holistic view of government — he doesn't know the difference between the CTBT and the ISBT.

A BUREAUCRAT ABOUT MULAYAM SINGH YADAV CONFUSING BETWEEN THE ABBREVIATIONS FOR THE COMPREHENSIVE TEST BAN TREATY AND THE INTER-STATE BUS TERMINAL

CHECK-LIST

Independents: what are their chances of making it to the new Lok Sabha

Kalpnath Rai: The strongman of Ghosi won the last election as an Independent because of the solid phalanx of the Muslim vote — the Muslims of the region who are supporters of Dawood Ibrahim felt an injustice had been done to Rai by imprisoning him under TADA, when all he was doing was helping 'Bhai'.

This time, Rai is being supported by the Samata Party. His acquittal in the TADA case is now the issue in Ghosi. Is likely to win.

Suich Ram: Won the last election as a Congress(I) candidate, was expelled by the Congress because of his prosecution in the telecom scam. And after being an Independent member of the Lok Sabha, floated his own party, the Himachal Pradesh Vikas Party. His election symbol is the telephone — and is likely to win for that reason alone.

Shankersinh Vaghela: Left the BJP, became an Independent, floated his own party and even installed it in government in Gujarat, but has since lost it. May reserve his energies for the Assembly elections.

Suresh Kalmadi: Has left the Congress in protest against Sitaram Kesri's leadership of the party, but hasn't joined the BJP yet. However, will be supported by the BJP in the election. Has ensured his bread is buttered on both sides — if the BJP forms the government at the Centre, he will join up; if the Congress is a partner at the Centre, will say he has always been a Congressman.

The fallen star

Whatever happened to poor Rajesh Khanna?

The hero of Bollywood nearly became the hero of New Delhi when L.K. Advani won the constituency by a narrow margin of about one per cent in 1991 defeating Rajesh Khanna. He subsequently resigned preferring to keep on his Gandhinagar seat.

R.K. Dhawan and his supporters worked flat out for Rajesh Khanna in that election. Later, Rajesh Khanna won the New Delhi seat in 1992 in a by-election.

But obviously he didn't work hard enough. For Jagmohan, who was fielded

Rajesh Khanna: losing out to Dhawan

from New Delhi against him in the 1996 polls, trounced Rajesh Khanna by a margin of 65,000 votes, the highest margin in recent memory.

This time, Dhawan figures that instead of letting Khanna fight the seat, he'd keep it for himself — so his name was one of the three announced in the Congress(I)'s first list.

What Rajesh Khanna says to this is not known. But this is one election Dimple Kapadia will not campaign in.

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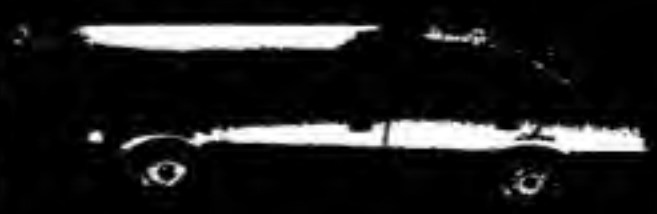

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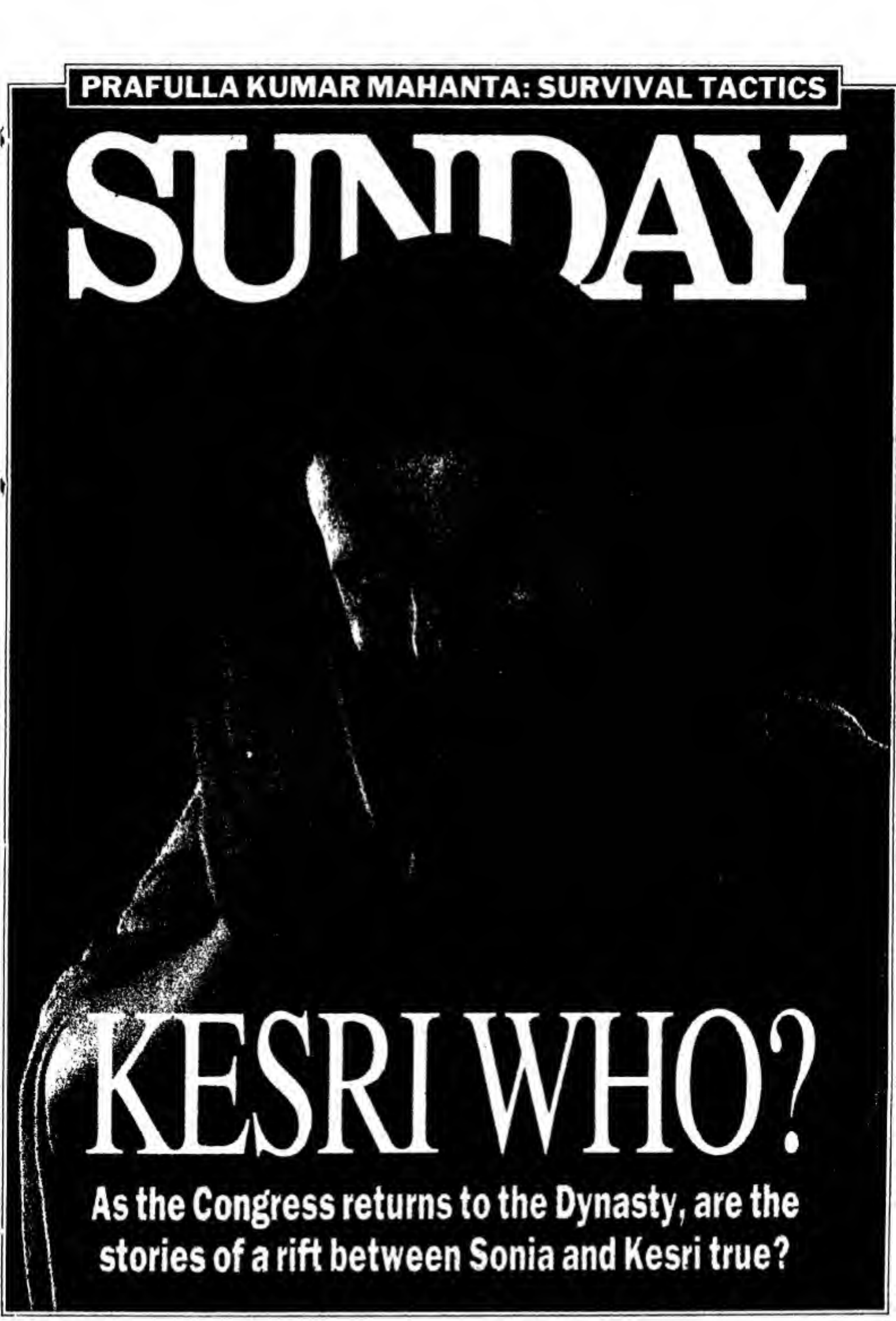
PRAFULLA KUMAR MAHANTA: SURVIVAL TACTICS

SUNDAY



KESRI WHO?

As the Congress returns to the Dynasty, are the stories of a rift between Sonia and Kesri true?

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Himalayan plunder

A recent study makes shocking revelations about the smuggling of north Bengal flora and fauna

No idle figurehead

Your cover story, *Man of the year 1997* (4—10 January) was extremely readable. You have rightly chosen India's first Dalit President K.R. Narayanan as the 'man of the year, 1997'. The urbane and erudite President has saved democracy in one of its darkest hours in recent times.

As democracy writhed in pain in Uttar Pradesh after Kalyan Singh took over from Mayawati as chief minister, Narayanan ignored the United Front's recommendation and declined to impose President's rule in the state. By calling the Cabinet's bluff, Narayanan has saved India from what could be a naked travesty of democratic norms.

Narayanan will go down in the history of Indian polity as the guardian of fairness and democracy.

Subhagata Chakrabarty, Calcutta (West Bengal)

■Your selection of President K.R. Narayanan as 'man of the year, 1997' was timely and just. If the President has distinguished himself as a man above petty, partisan loyalties and committed only to fair play, it is also all too appropriate that he would adorn the country's highest post during the Golden Jubilee year of its Independence.

Gandhiji always wanted the *dalits* and downtrodden to lead the nation and thus let upper caste India atone for its centuries of sin. The choice of K.R. Narayanan as your man of the year can therefore be seen as a small vindication of Gandhiji's dreams.

B. Chhetri, Gangtok (Sikkim)

K.R. Narayanan: Gandhi vindicated

Kid-gloves won't do

This refers to your story, *Communal cauldron* (14—20 December 1997). The Coimbatore police were surely wrong in taking the law into their own hands. The culprits among them should be identified and made to pay for their acts of commission and omission while tackling the communal flare-up in the city.

But can the DMK government absolve itself? The government has played vote bank politics and created a situation forcing even police personnel to seek protection from fundamentalist outfits like Ul Uma. What does it say about a government that cannot provide adequate security for its forces?

People like Batcha of Al Uma have so many cases pending against them. But the government has let them off. It is time all such people were rearrested and sent behind bars.

The incident in question is the third in a series that has rocked Coimbatore over the last one year. In the past 15 years more than 40 Hindu activists and four police personnel were killed by the extremists. It is time the government banned communal outfits like Al Uma. It is one thing to protect the minorities, but something entirely different to pamper fundamentalists among Muslims for political dividends.

L.Rohini, Tiruchy (Tamil Nadu)

Wanted toughness

This refers to your story, *A brush with death* (14—20 December 1997).

On 6 December, Ayodhya and the North were peaceful. But in Chennai and Thrissur

Tiruchi train blasts: eye-opener

bomb blasts were taking place and communal fires were burning in Coimbatore. All this more than proves that the religious extremists, especially the Muslim variety, have shifted their attention and bases to the south. The Centre and the state governments can ignore these bitter truths only at their own peril and at great cost to national unity and oneness.

These train blasts have one more lesson for the powers that be. And that is that RDX, certainly stashed away in secret piles across the country should be unearthed at the earliest. It is worth pointing out that RDX is suspected to have been used in the Tiruchi, Thrissur, and Erode train blasts.

Besides the Centre and the various state governments should co-ordinate their activities in intelligence gathering and exchange information at regular intervals. The menace of Islamic fundamentalism is now staring Kerala and Tamil Nadu in the face. All political parties should put up a united fight against fundamentalist threats.

Swati Chakraborti, Calcutta (West Bengal)

Disturbing trends

The spate of defections to the BJP highlights the fragility of secularism in our polity. Moreover, the lure of power sees ideology being given the go by. This explains the alacrity with which the BJP has been welcoming people whom it had been lambasting not so long ago. [*Struggling for the south* (28 December — 3 January)].

But what is truly disquieting is the number of ex-defence and police personnel swelling the Hindutva ranks. This definitely provides clues to their behaviour in service. The prognosis is grim indeed for the minorities.

Ashraf Hussain, Hyderabad (Andhra Pradesh)

Front runners

Your cover story, *An issue-less election* (21 —27 December 1997) seems to suggest that none of the three major front in the fray has a good selling point to convince the voter.

But recent developments have effected a sea change in the pre-election scenario. The Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) is no more with the United Front. The Congress is struggling to do up its corrupt face, but its alliance with the RJD has made the task difficult. And the party is facing splits in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal with leaders like Mani Shankar Ayer and Kumaramangalam, Kalmadi leaving the party.

The BJP, on its part, is rolling out a red carpet for all splitters and defectors. It has already struck an alliance with the AIADMK, a party sunk in corruption. The BJP, therefore, has lost its credibility as a principled party.

Despite its dismal record in government, the UF is better placed in the sense that it can go to the people with unexceptionable promises of secularism and even a new economic policy. It is not known how they will use their propaganda machinery to cash in on the advantage.

If the UF fails, the communal, casteist and corrupt forces will rule the country. It is a test case for the Indian electorate.

A.Jacob Sahayam, Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala)

Whose party is it anyway?

Apropos *Poll talk* in Random Notes (14 —20 December 1997), despite claiming allegiance to Sonia Gandhi and the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, Mamata Banerjee has declined to dismantle her rebel outfit in West Bengal.

UP was a stunning blow, and who knows, there may be more in store for the Congress. Indeed, there are clear indications that the Congress now lacks a helmsman who can steer the party out of trouble.

In fact, the party has only got what it deserves and will find few sympathisers outside its self-serving fold. Sworn to fight for national freedom, the party leaders, when it came to the crunch, dumped all principles and engineered a traumatic partition of the country.

After Independence, they busied themselves forming and maintaining a politician-bureaucrat-criminal nexus to fatten their wallets and let the country go to the dogs.

And now, some of its unabashed leaders are trying to rope in Sonia Gandhi only to ensure their own survival.

Amarnath Kamat, Bombay (Maharashtra)

Sonia Gandhi: last hope?

Contributed by Parthasarathi Banerjee, Calcutta (West Bengal)

Games leaders play

This refers to your story, *Identity crisis* (21 — 27 December 1997). The All Assam Students Union (AASU) is absolutely right in demanding that the names of all "foreigners" be struck off from the voters' list in Assam.

The AGP and its leaders like Prafulla Mahanta were in the forefront demanding that foreigners in Assam be identified and removed from the voters' list before they came to power. But once in power, they forgot this

Prafulla Mahanta: changing tack

demand. They are afraid that if they press this demand too hard, they will risk losing power, having come to power thanks mainly to the so called foreigners.

The Saikia government was no better in this respect. Once the late Saikia declared in the state assembly that some 35,000,00 illegal Bangladeshi migrants were living in Assam. But when the United Minorities Front threatened to unseat Saikia, he denied the existence of a single "foreigner" on Assamese soil. Could vote bank politics have gone any further?

N.Lakshmi, Madras (Tamil Nadu)

MILESTONES

RESIGNED: Raghuvansh Prasad Singh, Jai Narain Nishad and Kanti Singh — Union ministers belonging to the Rashtriya Janata Dal — from the Union Cabinet, on 9 January.

APPOINTED: T.R. Satish Chandran, principal secretary to former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, as Governor of Goa. The Governor of Maharashtra, P.C. Alexander, had been holding the additional charge of Goa.

APPOINTED: Madan Mohan Punchhi, as Chief

Justice of India, on 7 January, by President K.R. Narayanan. Punchhi was elevated to Supreme Court in 1989.

RESIGNED: Mizoram Governor P.R. Kyndiah, on 7 January. He will be contesting the forthcoming elections as a Congress candidate.

CLEARED: by the Supreme Court, on 7 January, the constitution of a five-member environmental protection authority by the central government.

BANNED: by the Election Commission, on 8 January, defacement of public property by [illegible] and hoardings by political parties.

SIGHT & SOUND

SURENDRA/THE HINDU

■ I could have easily saved my government by asking Mr Murasoli Maran to go home in the face of irrelevant, irrational and fallacious charges

I.K. GUJRAL. *Prime Minister, pointing out that he saved the country from breaking up*

■ We don't say that we will not join such a coalition government at the Centre, but a final decision will be taken only after observing the scenario which emerges after the elections.

HARKISHEN SINGH SURJEET. *CPI(M) general secretary, indicating that his party may join a coalition government at the Centre*

■ ***Jab woh ishara kar den, main apni topi, kapda, makan sab chhorney ko taiyar hoon*** **(The moment she signals, I will leave my cap, clothes, house and everything for her).**

SITARAM KESRI, *Congress president, dispelling doubts about his differences with Sonia Gandhi*

■ It will be wrong to say that outsiders will contaminate the party.

ATAL BEHARI VAJPAYEE, *senior BJP leader, pointing out that there was no resentment after 'outsiders' joined the party*

■ I am not in the race for the Prime Minister's post. I will no longer work even as a kingmaker. Now I will work as a cracker. Several will get their eyes punctured when I burst my cracker. Please wait and see.

LALOO PRASAD YADAV, *president of the Rashtriya Janata Dal*

■ Except for my father and brother, no other man matters to me. And that's the God's truth.

RAVEENA TANDON, *film actress*

SEEN

PASWAN EXPRESS

The railway minister makes a big show — all for votes

ON TRACK: *Paswan with the coolies*

The coolies were waiting, dressed to perfection. The familiar red *kurta* — only it looked bright and new — white spotless dhoti, all spruced up for the occasion. Six coolies were being felicitated with licences by railway minister Ram Vilas Paswan. But the minister was late.

The function was scheduled to begin at 5 pm, and the venue was Paswan's own territory — his office. All preparations had been made. Tea and snacks were being served, cameras were placed on their stands and journalists ready with their pads and pens

But where was Paswan? "Actually, *saheb bahut biji hain*," a peon told us. Busy with what? A core committee meeting of his party. You see, Paswan's bete noire Laloo Yadav was in town and he had to build up his armour to fight the Other Yadav.

Spotting a willing listener, the minister's PRO showered accolades on his master. "You know, the best part about the minister is that he doesn't want fame or any attention from the media." (Heavens, what were we doing here!) "I have told him so many times to be assertive and get his due share of recognition. Madam, do you have any suggestions as to how this can be done without drawing the attention of the Election Commission?"

Ah, the EC. So this was what the minister and his men were scared of. And they had reason to be. The EC had sent a note to the minister pulling him up for some of the railway projects he wanted cleared by the Prime Minister.

We were shaken as much by this realisation as by the sudden commotion and frenetic activity around us. Paswan had arrived — an hour late.

He looked aghast at the crowd! "What is this — why are there so many people here? Who are these coolies? Tell them I cannot do anything for them any more. Elections are round the corner and the EC will send me another note."

The PRO looked embarrassed. "Sir, the press has come to cover this function. Remember, you had to present them with licences?" Paswan did not remember, obviously, but he wasn't going to admit that. EC, or no EC. He got into action, doing what he is best at — beaming at the journalists and the cameras. Out came the coolies with their garlands and the minister fed them sweets. "I am very happy today," he said, after the function was over.

And why not? Election time — each clip in the evening news and every picture in the next day's newspapers is worth its weight in gold.

No one, of course, was approaching the coolies for quotable quotes. So I edged up close to one and asked him what he thought about the whole affair. He muttered, brow knitted, *itni der to humne train ke liye bhi intezaar nahin kiya.* (I have never waited so long even for a train.)" I nodded and we chugged back to our respective destinations, quietly blowing smoke. •

Pallavi Ghosh/New Delhi

Election time — each clip in the evening news and every picture in the next day's newspapers is worth its weight in gold

TASTE AND TALENT

Ramakrishna Hegde won't attend RSS shakhas *wearing khaki shorts, but he can get the BJP out of political tangles*

For those who thought former Karnataka chief minister Ramakrishna Hegde was down and out, now is the time to rethink. With both the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress competing for his favours till recently, the Lok Shakti boss is riding high. His market niche is intact. His appeal is undimmed. Everyone is vying to do a deal with him. For the first time in his life, his detractors are in other parties, not his own.

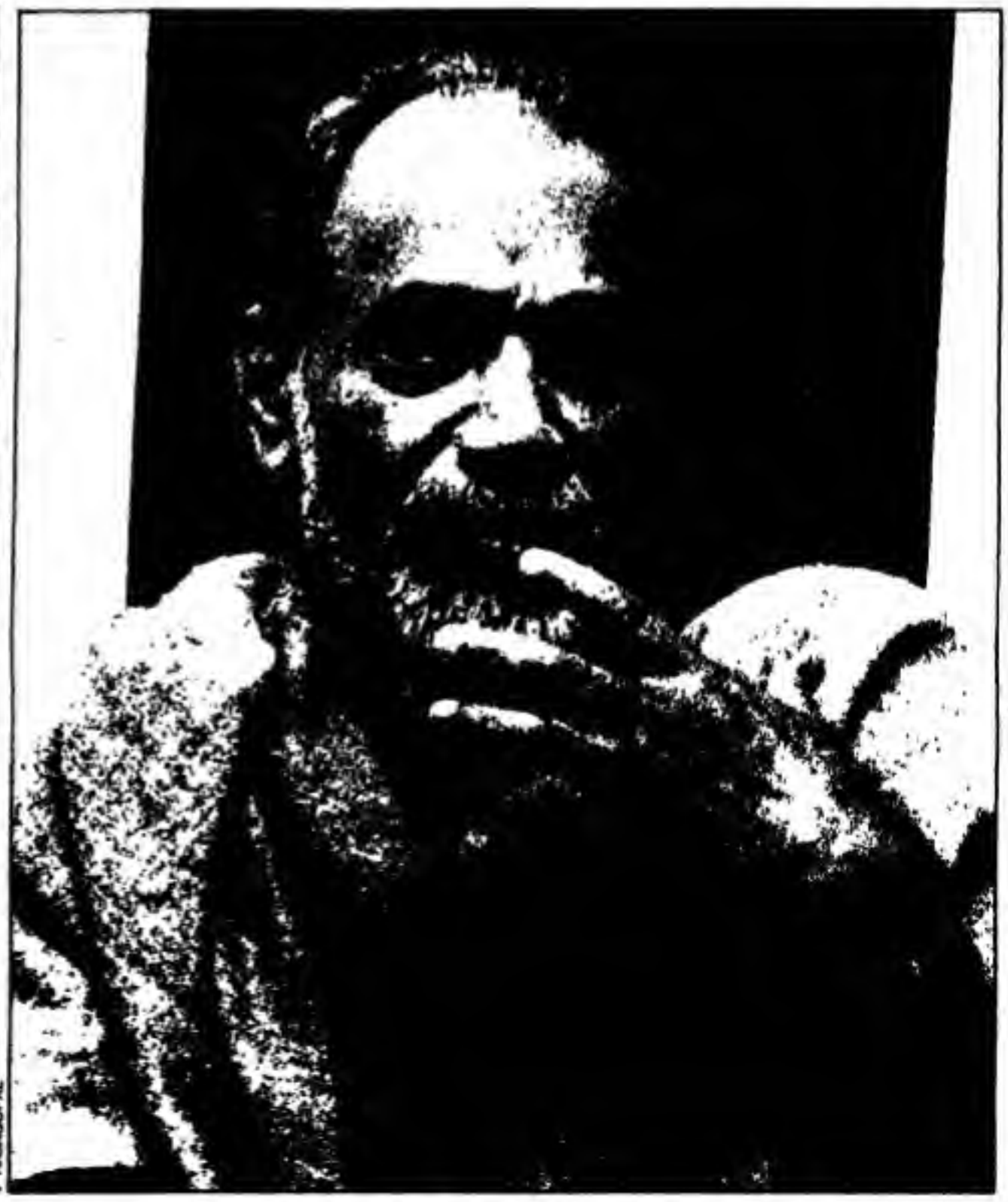
He finally decided to have an electoral understanding with the BJP for the coming parliamentary elections. For him, the party's agenda is clear. "To begin with we want to capture the 16 Lok Sabha seats Janata Dal has in Karnataka," said Hegde.

If Hegde sounds uncharacteristically confident — normally he makes diffidence, a charming political ploy — it is because he's spent most of his political life fighting enemies in his own party and finds, for the first time, that he doesn't have to do it anymore.

Correction. His own party? First, it was Chandra Shekhar, president of the Janata Party and later Janata Dal, who, operating through Deve Gowda (Hegde's No. 2 at the time) made it impossible for Hegde to function as chief minister.

Hegde tried to overlook all that and launched the ambitious panchayati raj exercise in Karnataka, winning over seminarists and intellectuals. He acquired the image of a 'thinking chief minister' who imbued the administration with that famous phrase, 'links with the grass roots'.

Unfortunately, he tried to please too many people all at once. The power cake is only so big. His political career lay in



V RAJAGOPAL

Hegde admits that the Babri Masjid demolition was a black spot on India's age-old culture of secularism but he feels that there is a definite change in the attitude of the minorities

not recognising limits to the lateral expansion of political power.

Hegde's antipathy for former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda dates back to those days. And the Deve Gowda-engineered expulsion of Hegde from the Janata Dal after Gowda was made Prime Minister was the ultimate slap on his face.

Now he has his own party. Most important, he can start with a clean slate.

So, what is Lok Shakti all about — apart from Ramakrishna Hegde?

He says he belongs to the socialist tradition and has been associated with the 'movement' since the very beginning. (Some socialists would dispute this, but that's neither here nor there.) When the Congress party split in 1969, Hegde decided to part ways with Indira Gandhi and went with his mentor S. Nijalingappa, former Karnataka chief minister who was then part of the Congress(O). He was later jailed for opposing the Emergency.

Thus, a broadly left of Centre, sorry liberal, collection of politically correct people? But what's he doing with the BJP?

His days in jail have helped him find a footing in politics many years later.

"One party put me in jail and the other was with me there," he says in defence of his deal with the BJP. Lal Krishna Advani and Hegde shared a cell in Bangalore jail while opposing the Emergency. "A seat adjustment with the BJP only makes sense," he adds.

So, Hegde had a great time in jail. Is that enough reason to tie up with the BJP?

The reason Hegde opposed the Congress was because it was a political party turned into a regency. "My friends in the Janata Dal said they would prefer an alliance with the Congress. I was just giving them time to decide." Ideological closeness apart, political compulsions had to be taken into account.

Critics point out that the BJP will use the charisma of Hegde and dump him when convenient. However, Hegde denies this. For him this is a 'mutually beneficial' arrangement that will help both the parties. "What is more important is that the country gets a stable government and an able leader which only the BJP can promise right now," he says.

What has turned him totally against the Congress party is the Sonia factor. "I've been opposing the dynastic rule for long, there can be no compromise on that," he says. "When senior Congressmen say that Sonia alone can save the country it is not only an insult to a 112-year-old party but to the country as well," explains Hegde.

In the bargain hasn't he compromised his secular credentials by tying up with the BJP?

Hegde admits that the demolition of the Babri Masjid was a 'black spot' on India's age-old culture of secularism but he feels that there is a definite change in the attitude of the minorities. "Why else would Aslam Sher Khan and the Awami Conference of Kashmir join the BJP?" he asks.

associated for yet another term with a set of back-stabbers, casteist politicians and disorganised north Indian pan-chewing riff-raff. The official line he gives is: "This (Laloo Yadav's) is not a viable front since the parties are either too weak or too new. Chandra Shekhar, Devi Lal, Chautala...and other such parties do not have a national presence."

But Ram *mandir* is not the only thing the BJP is all about. Hegde is more or less agreed on the BJP's economic policy. Along with economic independence he feels self-reliance is absolutely necessary. "We don't need to shut our doors to latest technological know-how but one has to keep national honour in mind. If China can do it, why can't we?" he says.

The Deve Gowda-engineered expulsion of Hegde from the Janata Dal after the former became Prime Minister was a slap on his face

If Hegde has his way, he's going to campaign on the '*Sonia Congress hatao, desh bachao*' plank. He will make up the manifesto of the Lok Shakti as he goes along. But if the BJP thinks it can coerce him into getting up at 4 am to attend RSS *shakhas* wearing khaki shorts, they should think again. Hegde won't do it. He's got too much good taste.

He also has that ineffable talent of saying a lot without saying anything. When the BJP gets into political tangles, it can safely rely on Hegde to provide a way out. For that's what he's going to do in Karnataka during the elections.

And the Janata Dal's loss is going to be the BJP's gain. •

Anuja Pande/New Delhi

Imperfect relations

The Congress suffers a major setback in its PR exercise

First there was one. Then there was another one. Now there are six. In its enthusiasm to present the right face to the public, the Congress has come out with an entire panel of spokespersons to brief the press.

Initially, the task was handled by V.N. Gadgil who handled the media just so. He would smile at the impertinent questions, deliver the most incredulous statements with the blandest of looks; and then win over the sceptics with his off-the-record briefings.

A few months ago, he was joined by Ajit Jogi, a tribal leader from Madhya Pradesh. Jogi was given the job for two reasons: a) as a sop for not making him state Pradesh Congress Committee chief b) because journalists used to run to Jogi's house anyway, once the 'official' briefing was over. He would then tell them what was really happening. The pair worked well — Gadgil would brief the media in English and Jogi would take over in Hindi.

However, there were more forces at work than just bilingual ones.

It was the brainwave of the now sacked Perfect Relations to bring some more people on the panel. "People who would represent the image the party wants to show to the voters," explained a member of the PR firm. And as many as four more 'politically correct' names were added to the panel.

Such as Salman Khurshid, Margaret Alva, Najma Heptullah and Ambika Soni. This, according to Perfect Relations, adequately met the issues of women's reservations and minorities.

It also threw up a whole lot of other issues. For one, Gadgil was not at all happy with the turn of events. He was there for the introductory session; but there was a marked difference in style.

For one, Khurshid insisted on picking up the follow-up questions. Where Gadgil would brush off questions like 'Why is Sonia Gandhi not being asked to lead the party?' with a smile, Khurshid would put his foot into it by saying 'Kesriji is our president; and Soniaji is our inspiration.'

Gadgil decided he had had enough and sat in Ghulam Nabi Azad's room during the next briefing while Khurshid and Co. manned the mikes.

The following day, at the daily meeting of the spokespersons, Gadgil made his displeasure clear. First, he pulled up latecomers to the meeting by saying that if they were going to be late each time, he'd call a meeting at 12.30 pm instead of 12.00. Next, he suggested that instead of all of them crowding the mikes, it made sense if one or two would accompany him at a time. No more.

This also had its drawbacks. When Margaret Alva started to read out a press note, she spoke at such slow speed that it almost sounded like a news bulletin for the hearing impaired. However, it was not her fault. She was told to read even more slowly by Major Ved Prakash, who usually functions at briefings as Gadgil's hearing aid.

The major, however, could not pull the same stunt on Najma Heptullah as this was but a natural extension of her job as deputy chairperson of the Rajya Sabha. For, she told reporters who were heckling her not to behave like MPs.

Apart from the problems from within, the plan has also backfired on another front. The BJP is now sneering at the Congress saying that "it needed three women to counter one Sushma Swaraj". A harsh comment for someone as fiesty and outspoken as Ambika Soni or Najma Heptullah.

More to the point, it is not the Muslim face or the Christian face that the voters are interested in, but the issue that the party stands for. •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

Earlier, Gadgil would smile at impertinent questions, deliver the most incredulous statements with the blandest of looks and win over sceptics with his off-the-record briefings

PRADIP SAHYAL

Laloo Prasad Yadav: front man

Laloo's last chance

The RJD chief cobbles together a disparate coalition to remain in the reckoning

It may not be smooth-sailing for the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) led by Laloo Prasad Yadav, despite the Jan Morcha coalition that the former Bihar CM cobbled up in Delhi last fortnight. To begin with, the party enters the race with a handicap imposed by the Election Commission (EC). The poll panel has declared that the RJD is only a registered party and not a recognised one.

Exercising its power under Article 324 of the Constitution, read with rules 5 and 10 of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, the EC initiated changes that are bound to undermine the RJD's poll prospects. In the opinion of the Commission, the RJD was neither a regional party nor a national one and, hence, it advised the maintenance of status quo till the party fulfilled the criteria for recognition.

This means Laloo Prasad and his men will now have to play on the backfoot as funds and privileges enjoyed by the RJD in the recent past will no longer be there to back up their campaign in Bihar and elsewhere in the country. Moreover, the RJD president will not get the opportunity to participate in debates with other leaders, either on the television or on the radio.

The EC, however, granted RJD the lantern as its election symbol, giving a cherubic Laloo a godsend opportunity to hold high a hurricane lamp every time he needs assurance about light at the end of the tunnel. Though the former Bihar CM continues to thunder: "*Jekar haath mein laltain ba, okker haath mein Parliament ba* (whoever has a lantern in his hand will have Parliament)", he is unlikely to find the going easy.

Compounding his problems is the EC stipulation restricting campaign to a 14-day period. Besides, he has been robbed of the opportunity of reaching the the electorate through TV and radio, and it has come as a rude shock to media-friendly Laloo Yadav, who has been dreaming of forming a government at the Centre.

What is more humiliating is that RJD candidates, unlike those of recognised parties, will have to pay for obtaining copies of electoral rolls. Moreover, while only one signature suffices for proposing the name of a nominee of a recognised party, an RJD candidate will have to secure as many as ten signatures from his party members.

As per the EC's ruling given on 15 December 1997, a party seeking recognition must be engaged in political activity for a minimum of five years. The rules also state that a party will have to win one seat for every 25 members in the Lok Sabha elections. The same set of rules also apply for Assembly elections, where a party will have to win one seat for every 30 members.

Hence, the RJD will have to win 22

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seats in Lok Sabha and 11 in the Assembly to make the grade. The rules also state that only if a political party performs well in at least four or more states and its candidates secure more than six per cent of the total votes polled, can it be treated as a 'national' party.

But Laloo remains unfazed by these rebuffs. He has taken a confrontationist attitude vis-a-vis the United Front (UF) by asking his three RJD ministers to quit the I.K. Gujral's caretaker government. "I've asked my ministers to quit and come to Bihar to prepare for the elections," declared the RJD president after returning from New Delhi.

SANJAY KUMAR

Morcha leaders: tenuous relationship

The Jan Morcha comprises a host of disparate parties, some of whose strength or credentials are in doubt even in the places where they belong. The new front is made up of the RJD, BSP, Samajwadi Janata Party of Chandra Shekhar, the Rashtriya Janata Party led by Shankersinh Vaghela, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha lead by Shibu Soren, and parties from Andhra Pradesh — Jai Telengana and Andhanadu.

But the alliance appears to be tenuous and brittle from the very beginning. BSP chief Kanshi Ram declared soon after the formation of the alliance that the Jan Morcha would be limited only till the elections. What he meant was that the BSP would continue to be a part of the Morcha till it chose to quit the formation.

The alliance does, however, promise some immediate gains to Laloo, as the JMM is expected to mop up a few seats in south Bihar, denting the BJP, which held 14 seats from the region in the last Lok Sabha. This is crucial for Laloo, as the plains of north and central Bihar are going to be fiercely contested. •

Naved Zahir/Patna

INDER MALHOTRA

Foul play

The government has denigrated the post of Cabinet Secretary all too often

What follows may not, on the face of it, seem relevant to either diplomacy or defence. But what has happened about the post of the Cabinet Secretary in recent days is nothing short of a wilful and shabby attempt to dig up the very foundations of the South Block, the citadel of governmental authority. The country ought to take serious notice and try to ensure that the murky goings-on are never again allowed to be repeated.

The Cabinet Secretary is the headmaster of the civil service in its entirety, including the foreign service and the civilian bureaucracy of the ministry of defence. And, despite the deplorable efforts of some of the successive governments to downgrade his position, he remains the lynchpin of the administration. There is no governmental activity, no matter how sensitive and secret, about which he is not informed. For instance, apart from the Prime Minister, the chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission (who doubles up as secretary of the department of atomic energy) and the head of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), the Cabinet Secretary is the only civilian to know about the precise state of the Indian nuclear programme at any given time. Moreover, Cabinet Secretaries have often been used to see through extremely delicate diplomatic missions.

Against this backdrop, isn't it shameful and scandalous that, at the time of writing, India should have been without a Cabinet Secretary for 72 hours? The Central Administrative Tribunal — better known by its expressive acronym CAT — seems to have arrogated to itself the power to dictate who should be Cabinet Secretary and who not. The contagion of "activism" is evidently spreading fast. The most intriguing part of CAT's peculiar verdict is that while the three-month extension to T.S.R. Subramaniam must be set aside, the government is free to reappoint him to the post from which he is being extruded. The legal arguments of the tribunal are too arcane to be comprehended. But the circumstances in which the matter was first referred to CAT and then dealt with, raises more questions than it answers.

The only defence of CAT I can think of is that it is behaving no worse than many others who have apparently convinced themselves that undermining the Indian State and its crucial agencies and functionaries is a good thing. However, why blame only CAT which evidently was piqued by Subramaniam's refusal to appear before it after a petition questioning the second extension to him had been filed?

The most intriguing part of CAT's peculiar verdict is that while the three-month extension to T.S.R. Subramaniam must be set aside, the government is free to reappoint him to the post from which he is being extruded

More than once the government itself has denigrated the post of Cabinet Secretary by giving him a very short tenure and then doling out brief extensions. Civil servants, too, have demeaned themselves by lobbying hard and sordidly whenever the key post falls vacant. In P.V. Narasimha Rao's time, once the scramble for the top job had become so dirty that I was constrained to comment that to call what was going on in the bureaucratic labyrinth the usual rat race "was an insult to the rodents". Later, Rao made history of sorts by using the august platform of the Red Fort on Independence Day to confide to the country that he was under "intense pressure" to give an extension to the then Cabinet Secretary, Zafar Saifullah, "on religious grounds".

This time around, caste, not community, has become the main driving force. It needs to be remembered that Subramaniam was unceremoniously removed as chief secretary of Uttar Pradesh at the behest of Mayawati who could not stomach the idea of a Brahmin being the head of the UP administration. Behind the tirade against Subramaniam's extension is the anger that this has deprived Mata Prasad, also a fine officer and a Dalit, of the opportunity to be Cabinet Secretary. The matter was unabashedly raised before CAT. Soli Sorabjee, appearing for the government, tersely told the tribunal that even if Subramaniam was told to go home, Mata Prasad could not succeed him for the simple reason that Prasad is third on the list of seniority. The question, however, is whether this is the ideal way of running a country like India, with loud claims about equality before the law and "deep devotion" to secularism? •

RAJIV SHUKLA

A million dollar question

Where will all the VDIS money go?

The government has raked in more than Rs 10,000 crore from the Voluntary Disclosure of Income Scheme (VDIS). While this is good news, the more important task lies ahead: the proper utilisation of this fund. After all, the VDIS collections are a vindication of the people's faith in the government and a lot of hard work has gone into making it a success.

So, where will all the money go? The VDIS had been launched on the basis of a proposal from West Bengal chief minister Jyoti Basu. And Union finance minister P. Chidambaram had promised to give 60 per cent of the total collections to the states.

Most state governments are in a financial mess and the VDIS money will come as a windfall. Rajasthan chief minister Bhairon Singh Shekhawat has already asked for his share.

There is every likelihood of the money being spent by state governments to pay off their dues with regard to day-to-day administration and balance their own books. In Bihar, for instance, the government is ready to use the money for salary disbursement pending for months.

The Government of India (GOI) should distribute the VDIS money to state governments on the condition that it will be spent on developmental projects and programmes. It should monitor the matter like the World Bank. If any state government is caught misusing this fund, the same amount should be deducted from the state's share in the Planning Commission's plan outlay.

It is also being suggested that the Union government should adjust a state's share in the VDIS collection in accordance with its 'power dues'. Almost every state owes the central government several hundred crores of rupees and is facing severe power problems. If the Centre decides to waive some of these dues and adjust them with the VDIS allocation, it will serve the purpose of both. And the GOI can later invest this money in infrastructural and other developmental work.

The government is also taking serious steps to safeguard the identities of all those who responded to the VDIS. Initially, P. Chidambaram and revenue secretary N.K. Singh had decided to keep the records in sealed envelopes, with the tax authorities of different zones. But now, the top-brass in North Block has decided to destroy all records pertaining to the scheme. According to N.K. Singh, all VDIS forms filled up by declarants and other annexures will be destroyed.

The information absolutely essential for future legal reference, is being stored in a 'floppy' which will be kept in the safe custody of the revenue secretary or the chairman of the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT). A debate is raging over whether it should be kept with the CBDT chairman or with the revenue secretary. But the latter's locker is likely to be the final resting place for this all-important floppy.

According to sources in the department of revenue, this method will prevent income-tax officials from misusing the vital information. This will boost the credibility of the finance ministry and help it gain the confidence of the people.

Meanwhile, the revenue department has decided that, in future, no cellphone operator can sell cash Sim cards as it "encourages tax evasion". From now on, if anybody wants to purchase a cash Sim card, he will have to disclose his permanent account number (PAN) to the concerned cellphone operator. The government is also planning to make it mandatory for all cellphone owners to file their income-tax returns. •

Finance minister P. Chidambaram had promised to give 60 per cent of the total VDIS collections to the states. But the central government should distribute the money on the condition that it will be spent on developmental programmes

True Lies

Is there a face-off between Sonia Gandhi and Sitaram Kesri?

Barely had Kesri begun his speech at the convention of the National Students' Union of India that the heckling began. "*Sonia Gandhi lao, desh bachao*" was fine. But "*Sonia Gandhi lao, Congress bachao*"?

Sonia Gandhi was taking her responsibilities seriously. Earlier this month, the coordination committee set up by the Congress to chalk out her election campaign itinerary called on her at 10 Janpath to have a preliminary discussion.

The four-member committee — Congress vice-president Jitendra Prasada, who is the chairman, Ghulam Nabi Azad who is its convenor, Margaret Alva and Ahmad Patel, the Congress party treasurer — sat a little stiffly holding their cups of tea as they discussed the election. The issue was which constituencies she should visit.

Sonia Gandhi listened intently, only stopping to interrupt once. "I would like to consult my children," she said. "Can we plan tomorrow?" Then she called Priyanka and Rahul Gandhi inside.

"Please persuade my children that I have a task and that they should help me," she told the committee with a smile. After a short discussion, both Priyanka and Rahul agreed that she should begin her campaign from Sriperumbudur, where their father had died.

It was also decided that Priyanka would accompany her mother. Maybe Rahul would join the campaign after he had wound up the computer business he has in London.

Sonia Gandhi had taken the plunge. Not everyone was euphoric.

Sitaram Kesri's face looked pinched and drawn. Barely had he begun his speech at the convention of the National Students' Union of India that the heckling began. "*Sonia Gandhi lao, desh bachao*" was fine. But "*Sonia Gandhi lao, Congress bachao*"?

Squinting against the light, Kesri tried to see who the hecklers were. "The unit from Madhya Pradesh," somebody whispered from the back. Everything fell into place. It was Arjun Singh, of course.

Kesri tried his own brand of politics. Along with the hecklers, he too began raising slogans: "*Jawaharlal Nehru zindabad; Mahatma Gandhi zindabad*". In a pathetic attempt at maintaining his poise, without missing a beat he shouted: "*Sonia Gandhi zindabad*". A trick to neutralise hecklers, it worked.

Sonia doesn't want to interfere in granting tickets, nor has she formally assumed the leadership of the Congress. It is only those suffering from paranoia of an extreme form who would start seeing her as a threat, especially a Congress leader of the standing of Sitaram Kesri

As a way to demonstrate his leadership, it failed miserably.

This was the first indication that something was seriously amiss in the relationship — or lack of it — between Sonia Gandhi and Sitaram Kesri.

It was bound to happen. The Congress is a unipolar party. Kamlapati Tripathi tried to be the elder statesman of a party when Rajiv Gandhi was its president and came a cropper. Arjun Singh thought he was the best person to become an active No. 2, but was sidelined. Two poles of power cannot exist in the Congress. The party is just not used to it.

When Sonia Gandhi indicated that she would help the Congress campaign, Congress workers can hardly be blamed for seeing her as the court of appeal against Kesri.

But, Sonia Gandhi's friends say, she doesn't want to be a pole at all. Earlier, she was closeted at home. Now she has

Sonia supporters celebrating her birthday outside 10 Janpath

realised that she has a bigger role and has come out of her self-imposed seclusion. She doesn't want to interfere in granting tickets, nor has she formally assumed the leadership of the Congress. It is only those suffering from paranoia of an extreme form who would start seeing her as a threat, especially a Congress leader of the standing of Sitaram Kesri.

Paranoid or not, Kesri gave himself away by small gestures. Not all of it is his fault.

The greatest source of provocation were those who went away from the Congress, forming the Congress(T): Arjun Singh, Narain Dutt Tiwari and others. The pressure was put on Kesri from day one, when a whisper campaign was launched that he was opposed to Sonia.

Small things began to irritate Kesri. He was the elected president of the Congress. The long line of cars full of people awaiting tickets should have been outside his Purana Qila Road residence. Instead, AICC — and 10 Janpath — were the venue of the mela, with both sides of Akbar Road so badly blocked by cars that passing cars could barely squeeze through.

Former MPs and MLAs who wanted tickets should have come to his doorstep to touch his feet and beg for tickets. Instead, MPs waited uncomplainingly for up to three hours just to meet Vincent George, Sonia Gandhi's secretary.

Sonia Gandhi began creating a constituency for herself. Earlier it was just the Congress MPs. Now, from 5 pm to 6 pm everyday, anyone could meet her. The 'Janata Durbar' was the prerogative of party presidents. Any one else holding them was certainly trying to upstage the president.

Naturally Kesri was upset. His importance began to go down. He had no doubt at all that, given half a chance, Congressmen he had not favoured would go to Sonia Gandhi and poison her mind against him. There was now a court of appeal against Kesri. And like everyone else, he resented being judged.

His irritation began to show. If anyone asked him for a ticket, where earlier he would listen patiently, now his piqued response was a shrug and: "*Hamse na*

The Souring of the Relationship

Why 10 Janpath got mad

● R.K. Dhawan's Lok Sabha nomination was announced without 10 Janpath okaying it. It is nobody's case that Sonia Gandhi should initial the candidature of every Lok Sabha candidate the party puts up. But when she's been billed star campaigner of the party, the least the party can do is to tell her whom they're getting her to endorse.

R.K. DHAWAN

● Laloo Yadav issued a statement that Sonia Gandhi should confine herself to campaigning and should not seek election. Normally, what an Opposition party says is of no interest to the Congress. But not only did the Congress fail to rap Laloo for advancing unsolicited advice, but word got round that Sitaram Kesri was calling up people and drawing their attention to what Laloo had said. Given the close relationship between Laloo and Kesri, everyone thought Kesri had put Laloo up to it. This is probably not true, but Kesri-baiters got into the act and saw an opportunity to carry tales to 10 Janpath.

ARJUN SINGH

● Arjun Singh's candidature from Hoshangabad was announced without any consultation: neither within the Congress nor in the working committee. Even senior members of the Congress don't know where they are contesting the elections from. Kesri's supporters saw the announcement as a tit-for-tat action from 10 Janpath, in retaliation against R.K. Dhawan.

● Mamata Banerjee called Sonia Gandhi a 'big zero' and no one said a word in her defence! Worst of all, Kesri kept on about how Mamata was like a daughter to him despite being roundly insulted by Mamata, and didn't bother to rap her knuckles.

Middle of the Road

The tempering forces in the Congress

MANMOHAN SINGH

● Ahmad Patel, the Congress treasurer, is not against Kesri, but is influential in the Congress because of his access to Sonia Gandhi.

● Manmohan Singh, the former finance minister, has been projected as Sonia Gandhi's choice as Prime Minister. The truth is he would make a neutral Prime Minister in the sense that he would be acceptable to both Sonia and Kesri. But Sonia's choice? Hard to say.

● If A.K. Antony can forget his differences with K. Karunakaran and project Sonia Gandhi as the Congress' only hope, there is some chance of a Congress revival in Kerala. Has earned the respect of both Sonia Gandhi and Kesri. Doesn't have to take sides.

● J.B. Patnaik is playing both ways. The acid test is whether he will give P.V. Narasimha Rao a ticket from Berhampore — then Sonia Gandhi will decide what she thinks of him.

● Jitendra Prasada, the chief of the campaign committee, will chalk out Sonia's plan. He is also Sitaram Kesri's No. 2 — that is, his vice-president. Walking in the middle of the road is dangerous because you can get run over.

poochhen — 10 number sey poochh lijiye (Don't ask me; ask No. 10)."

One of the spokespersons asked him if Sonia could go to Sriperumbudur — the BBC wanted to interview her. "Why are you asking me? Please take 10 Janpath's permission," Kesri said irritably. The spokesperson was taken aback, unprepared for the fury in the answer.

Kesri also began to use the 'ask No. 10' routine with those he wanted to deny a ticket. "I have no objection, but you'd better ask No 10," he told scores of ticket-seekers who knew they hadn't a snowball's hope in hell of getting access to Sonia Gandhi.

That the Sonia 'card' was being played subtly and by proxy raised Kesri's hackles even more. Like R.K. Dhawan in the past who hated Vincent George's guts because of his privileged position, V. George became the target of ticket-seekers who wanted their message delivered to Sonia. George was in a position to lobby for people. Where earlier he used to come to work at 10 am and leave at about 4 pm, with a break for lunch, he found that he was having to return to the old routine of the Rajiv Gandhi era: never leaving 10 Janpath before 3 am or 4 am every morning because there were so many people to meet.

So while Sonia Gandhi may not have assumed charge of the Congress, the party let her know in as many subtle and vul-

Kesri with A.K. Antony (left)

gar ways as possible that she had.

Kesri loyalists like Pranab Mukherjee and Tariq Anwar tried to reassure Kesri and restore his poise. He was, after all, the president of the party. But Kesri went on receding into a depression, no longer able to respond to anxious queries of his supporters about. *"Ab kya hoga?* (What happens now?)."

But can you blame the Congress? Faced with a hostile electorate and an unequivocal challenge from the BJP, Congressmen tried to rack their brains and keep at a distance anything they thought would be a political handicap. Accordingly, when the PR agency Politbureau *(see accompanying story)* went before the Screening Committee with its presentation, they were given clear instructions that the posters they were designing should have photographs only of Nehru, Indira, Rajiv and Sonia. The message was: avoid Kesri's pictures. At meetings where he was present, Congressmen kept saying, *"Election key liye ek face chahiye, jo Vajpayee key khilaf laga sake* (We need a face for the elections which we can juxtapose against Vajpayee's)." Was it really necessary to say this on the Congress president's face? Implying his face wouldn't sell the Congress?

Kesri was the elected president of the Congress. The long line of cars full of people awaiting tickets should have been outside his residence. Instead, AICC and 10 Janpath were the venues of the mela

An incident like the NSUI rally would have shaken anyone's poise. It shook Kesri's so badly that he had to prove he too was a loyalist. The repeated statements of loyalty, exhortations about honest brokering, presenting evidence of service to the Nehru-Gandhi family... all these betray a tense, nervous and humiliated Kesri.

The tragedy of the situation is that Sonia Gandhi doesn't want to run anything. She is trying to come out of the shadows. There was a time when those who used pictures of Sonia Gandhi on posters were berated by 10 Janpath for exploiting her name. That is no longer the case. But nor does this mean that she will jump into politics and usurp Kesri's position.

In this battle of symbols, gestures and signals, 10 Janpath believes there is an offer to Sonia Gandhi to head the Congress party — but for the moment, she is not inclined to accept the invitation.

But there's still the election to go through. And in the post-election scenario, anything is possible. •

Aditi Phadnis/New Delhi

All the President's Men

The Kesri-loyalists

PRANAB MUKHERJEE: Sonia Gandhi still hasn't forgiven him for trying to do Rajiv Gandhi out of the Crown after Mrs Gandhi died. Subsequently, Mukherjee's leaving the Congress to plot against Rajiv Gandhi's return, has not endeared him to Sonia. For that reason, Mukherjee is clinging on to Kesri's coat-tails.

TARIQ ANWAR: Is deeply respectful towards Sonia — who isn't? — but when things come to the crunch, will always be on Sitaram Kesri's side. After all, it was Kesri who gave him his present job of political adviser to the Congress president.

R.K. DHAWAN: He was once what Vincent George is today. R.K. Dhawan owes his rehabilitation to Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesri, after the Thakkar Commission said that the needle of suspicion in the Indira Gandhi assassination pointed to Dhawan. Now will stand by Kesri, having seen the fickleness and arrogance of the Gandhi family.

Marching Orders

Why was the Congress' PR agency sacked so unceremoniously?

It was Rajiv Gandhi who began the tradition of hiring PR consultants to help the Congress(I) crystallise its image and give the party posters an element of design.

'Design' is the operative word that came in the way of the Congress and Perfect Relations, the PR agency which the party hired first in 1993.

On 8 January this year, the Congress Campaign Committee met at the AICC. This was a review meeting — routine after Politbureau, a subsidiary of Perfect Relations, was hired. The meeting took place in the office of Congress president Sitaram Kesri. The Politbureau team was to have participated and discussed the issues of the day

But members of the team were kept waiting outside and were told the president would talk to the party spokespersons first

The system Politbureau had evolved was: they would help the Congress with press briefings, communications and image-building. And a daily feedback would be given about the way the party was viewed.

Over a period of time, the beavers at Politbureau had finalised reports on the party's image and the way it needed changing. The initial report said that the Congress leadership was viewed as being 'aged and jaded', the party was seen as being elitist (Politbureau suggested that briefings be held in Hindi to correct this bias and most of the spokespersons were not too happy about this). The Congress was seen as being ridden with factionalism. And it was seen as being a destabilising agent.

On that day, this report was the one being discussed. And the angriest was Sitaram Kesri, at being described as 'aged and jaded'.

"It is easy to deal with two or three people. But with the Congress it got messy because one had to talk to at least 10 to 12 people if one wanted to do anything. You didn't talk to one person and that person had a problem with us," said a source at Politbureau about their tenure.

According to a Congress campaign committee member, Kesri was the one who put his foot down. "There are leaders who have a relationship with their people via the newspapers. The Congress has perfect relations with its voters without newspapers coming into it. So I don't need Perfect Relations," Kesri is said to have remarked at the meeting, furious at being described as 'jaded and aged', obviously unfavourable when contrasted with Sonia Gandhi.

Perfect Relations says their feedback to the party was critical but that it wasn't anything personal: they thought they should tell the party how it was perceived and how it could correct its image.

Kesri, in fury and frustration, merely said that he wasn't going to pay anyone Rs 35 lakh to be told he was jaded and aged, and told them to pack up and leave.

Politbureau had some interesting ideas about Sonia Gandhi's campaign. They believed she should have worn only white saris, should have done a relatively silent campaign with the accent on pictures because she would have been the point of visual appeal the Congress lacks at present. They also suggested that Sonia Gandhi tour backward, poor and tribal areas, as these were closely identified with

olitbureau

Perfect Relations says their feedback to the party was critical but that it wasn't anything personal: they thought they should tell the party how it was perceived and how it could correct its image

Rajiv Gandhi. The agency was also reported to have been studying video footage to provide hints about how Sonia Gandhi should be presented.

But Perfect Relations is out of it, because "a certain group within the Congress party" has had "serious differences with it in its operating style". We all know which group.

Here is an extract from the report prepared by Perfect Relations, which made Kesri mad. The report was kept confidential, for obvious reasons.

Present Status of the Congress Party
(based on perceptions)

Areas of weakness

- Congress is seen to have lost touch with the masses.
- Perceived to be an elitist party.
- Although the Congress started the process of liberalisation, it is today stuck with only the negative connotations of this policy.
- The leadership structure of the party is centric and not collective. Also very aged and jaded.
- The Congress is seen to be a party which is plagued with factionalism and infighting.
- Congress seen as government breaker and destroyer.

Some basic issues of the election

"THE BOREDOM FACTOR": We need to find issues that will excite the electorate. They do not feel enthusiastic about voting again after 18 months. So we need to create some elements of excitement.

"WE HATE ALL POLITICIANS": There is much public anger against all parties. The people feel that no leader and no party has delivered anything. So keep "leader" issue on hold and highlight 'people' factor.

"ELECTION RUN-UP PERIOD IS LONG": There will be lots of spills and speculation. We must not lose any round. So hold our best efforts till the end.

"NO ISSUES ELECTION": This will create possibility of caste/communal biases. Very traditional voting patterns may be resorted to. So create hooks to push people into *one* direction.

When to Launch the Attack: Timing of the Campaign

- This election is non-issue-based with none of the parties having a central agenda which can win them the poll.
- Moreover, the voters are tired of voting again and are angry at the politicians for making the country go through another election.
- We therefore recommend that the party maintain a lower profile as compared to the Opposition in the first phase of the campaign and start a high-impact campaign from the second week of January.

Why?

- The UF will be bitter at being thrown out of power and will launch a major campaign to gain the sympathy vote. It cannot delay this campaign as it will lose impact later, at the same time it will not be able to maintain this tempo for a period of three months.
- The BJP expects to win this election and probably has the most to highlight to the voters. It will therefore launch a sustained campaign till the end without many highs and lows.
- At this time, if the Congress also launches its campaign with great fanfare, it will lose out as it will be the party which will be blamed for the elections and secondly its own positive campaign will be lost in the high noise created by its competitors.
- By delaying its attack the party will be able to target the Opposition when it is at its weakest and create top-of-the-mind awareness just before the elections.

Aditi Phadnis/New Delhi

THE SONIA SHOW

The Congress' maiden election rally at Sriperumbudur shows signs of change in Tamil Nadu's political equations

She came, she saw, she conquered. That would be the right phrase to describe the launch of Sonia Gandhi's election campaign for the Congress from Sriperumbudur. Dressed in a deep green cotton sari and accompanied by daughter Priyanka wearing a red and mustard Kancheepuram taking a leaf out of Indira Gandhi's book, she waved, smiled, threw garlands at the crowd, sprinkled Tamil words like *vanakkam* and extended Pongal greetings with the traditional "*Pongal nal vaazhthukkal*". And Priyanka stole the thunder at the end of the function when she appealed to the people in Tamil to vote for the Congress.

Accompanied by daughter Priyanka, Sonia waved, smiled, threw garlands at the crowd, sprinkled Tamil words like *vanakkam* and extended Pongal greetings

Said Kanniamma (65) who had travelled from Salem to see Sonia: "Priyanka reminds me so much of Indiraji and she has the same radiant smile of Rajiv Gandhi. If only the Congress gets its act together we may be able to make her the next Prime Minister." Added Vadivelu, a farm worker from nearby Chengalpattu, "I came on my own as the party did not make any transport arrangements. My friends dropped out because of it, but after seeing Sonia and Priyanka I am convinced that the Gandhi legacy is still alive."

Sonia, referred to as the Sphinx by the media, charmed the gathering of less than 10,000 at Sriperumbudur. Her presentation had an emotional underpinning and struck a chord with those who came to see her more out of curiosity than anything else. Sonia's speechwriter had done an excellent job.

During the course of her 20-minute speech in English, simultaneously translated and rendered in typical Tamil oratorial style by former state Congress president Kumari Anandan, she made a veiled attack on "communal forces" (read BJP) and explained that only the Congress had the "experience" to provide the required "stability".

Sonia studiously avoided any reference to regional parties including the TMC and the DMK. State Congressmen were expecting her to hit out particularly at the latter as it was made out in the media that it was because of her dislike for the DMK that the Congress had withdrawn support to the UF government after the Jain Commission had blamed the party for Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. A few days earlier, Union finance minister and TMC leader P. Chidambaram had said that "Sonia will not hit out against the TMC". The remark infuriated Congressmen in the state.

Now, the latter are saying that it was a hint of things to come as Sonia has realised that some day in the not too distant future her party may have to do business with the DMK. The Karunanidhi regime on its part saw to it that the entire police force was mobilised to prevent any untoward incident. (There was a bomb blast at the Gemini flyover in Madras an hour before Sonia's arrival.) The DMK-controlled Sun TV gave the Sonia show excellent prime-time coverage, even better than the local Doordarshan. Sun TV had earlier almost blacked out the AIADMK conference and its alliance with the BJP.

Refuting the criticism that she was a foreigner, Sonia said that she had become "part of India 30 years back when I entered Indira Gandhi's home as her eldest son's bride. It was through her heart that I grew to understand and love India".

Another jibe was at the security provided for Rajiv Gandhi. "I stand here today, surrounded by security, where he stood valiantly facing his assassins unprotected and alone," said Sonia. The audience was definitely moved.

The big question, however, is whether Sonia's entry and her emotional appeal will have a significant impact on the electorate. "Soniaji's visit has created a tremendous impact. The Congress needs an icon and what better than a member of the Nehru-Gandhi family to kick off the election campaign?" said K. Sakthivel, general secretary of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee.

Congressmen in Tamil Nadu — whatever little is left of them with nearly 80 per cent of the grass-roots workers joining the TMC — are happy that now they too have a "political superstar" like Advani, Karunanidhi or Jayalalitha in Sonia Gandhi. In a state where larger-than-life cardboard cut-outs of film stars and politicians are a must to attract the masses, Sonia Gandhi is definitely a huge draw.

A former Congress MP said, "Now we are sure that we will not lose our deposit in the election. And if Moopanar and his TMC were with us, we would have swept the polls without the help of any Dravidian parties." Meanwhile, to avoid embarrassment, Moopanar hurriedly planned an election tour of Erode and Madurai and vanished from Madras a day before Sonia's arrival. But one of his MLA's, K.M. Haroon, arranged 20 vehicles for Sonia's rally. Moopanar and his party leaders are also rumoured to have helped TNCC president K.V. Thangkabalu in making the meeting a success.

Said Ved Prakash, an AICC joint secretary accompanying Sonia, "We were not worried about the size of the gathering since this was only an emotional start to Soniaji's election campaign." Still Thangkabalu did manage to gather a modest crowd on just three days' notice and at a time when most vehicles had been booked for the Sabarimala pilgrims.

The fallout of the Sonia visit can be gauged from the following scenario. The grand alliance of the AIADMK, BJP, MDMK, PMK and other assorted parties is facing problems over seat distribution and DMK men have a sneaky feeling that the TMC workers at the grass-roots level may vote en bloc for the Congress.

As political pundits say that even if the Congress gets one or two seats out of the 39 in Tamil Nadu in a three-cornered fight, then it certainly could be attributed to the "Sonia factor"

There seems to be a large Nehru-Gandhi sympathy-vote bank in Tamil Nadu, known for its *amma* politics from the days of Indira Gandhi. But Congress workers say that Sonia should have entered politics at least a few weeks earlier so that an alliance with her loyalists could be forged in the state. •

Sreedhar Pillai/Sriperumbudur

SCORP NEWS

Sonia and Priyanka laying a wreath at Rajiv Gandhi's memorial at Sriperumbudur: taking up the mantle

DIRECTOR UNDER FIRE

The loneliness of R.C. Sharma

It's not difficult for a CBI director to take on the political establishment. And often this proves a profitable course of action. Consider the case of Joginder Singh, a previously obscure Karnataka policeman raised to CBI director by Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda to fix his political opponents. Singh managed to ensnare Laloo Yadav, damage G.K. Moopanar in the Indian Bank scam, and trap P.V. Narasimha Rao in a host of cases. It was only when he started on Sitaram Kesri that the Congress pulled the plug on Deve Gowda.

Even so, Joginder flourished. When Inder Gujral finally sent him packing on the grounds that a CBI director could not afford to be an interview-junkie who had turned the bureau into New Delhi's answer to the Keystone Cops, Joginder — or Tiger Joginder as he was nicknamed after the late lamented wrestling champion — told the press that he had fallen victim to the Forces of Darkness while fighting for Truth, Justice and An Extension. (Oops! He didn't actually say that but everybody knew what he meant.)

No such luck for poor R.C. Sharma, the Tiger's media-shy successor. Even before he took over, he had been pilloried by the press, at least partly on the bizarre ground that he was related to Sonia Gandhi (funny, he doesn't *look* Italian), and was therefore sabotaging the Bofors enquiry. After he became director, a new charge was added. He was Sitaram Kesri's man. If this was so, then Kesri operated by remote control; he had never met R.C. Sharma. And when the director was hospitalised after a fall last month and Kesri decided to pay him a visit, an embarrassed Sharma huddled behind the bedclothes.

But it isn't the media that have made life difficult for Sharma. It is a much more powerful section of society: the judiciary.

Over the last few months, the Supreme Court has delighted in tormenting the hapless director. It started with Chief Justice Verma accusing him of following in Tiger Joginder's publicity-seeking footsteps. (This was almost certainly unfair. Sharma may have many imperfections, but he is not a publicity hound.)

And now, the court seems to have decided that he will not get the brief extension that the government had decided to give him. (Though there are other interpretations of the court order.) The government had decided to extend the services of all key civil servants — the Cabinet Secretary, the director of Intelligence, etc. — on the grounds that the new government should select their successors after the elections.

But the Supreme Court delivered a judgement that put this decision in doubt. It refused to hear a petition against Sharma's appointment stating that in any case he was retiring soon. But, it added, 'he should not be given an extension'.

Did that mean that he should not be given a significant extension? Or did it mean that he had to step down on 31 January without availing of the two-month extension that has been given to all senior civil servants? Nobody is really sure. And there is some consternation over the court's decision to not consider the petition on the one hand, and to yet announce that Sharma would not get an extension without going into the issues.

For Sharma, the situation is complicated by his position as a serving civil servant. According to the law, a civil servant can defend himself if he's attacked by the press. And as Tiger Joginder has proved, he can even get some mileage out of being attacked by the political establishment.

But if a civil servant is attacked by the courts, well, then, there's not much he can do.

Though it would be entirely inappropriate to suggest that the court was motivated by anything other than the facts of the case when it made its rulings, there is no doubt that Sharma and the Supreme Court have long held differing perceptions on the role of the CBI.

This first became evident in the in-camera hearings on the Havala case. It was Sharma's view that no case could be made out under the Prevention of Corruption Act on the basis of the Jain diary. The court clearly did not accept this and neither did Sharma's then boss, former CBI director Vijay Rama Rao.

Sharma's view of the CBI is that it is a

R.C. Sharma's view of the CBI is that it is a very specialised investigating agency. He does not believe that it is an 'arresting agency'. He inclines to the old-fashioned view that a man is innocent until he's proved guilty

very specialised investigating agency. He does not believe that it is an 'arresting agency'. He does not accept the view — advanced by the media, amongst others — that the legal process takes so long in India that it is best to arrest people and throw them in jail without bail for a while so that rough justice can be done. He inclines to the old-fashioned view that a man is innocent until he's proved guilty. And that just because the CBI files a charge-sheet, it does not follow that penal action is inevitable. He is not in favour of denying bail to white-collar criminals, if there is no danger of flight or of tampering with evidence.

His associates say that he has been critical of the activist role of the judiciary in private. It is said that he made some notings to this effect on the CBI's internal files in the JMM affair. He did not know then — who did? — that the court would ask for these files and peruse them.

Clearly, the director and the judiciary have been on a collision course for some time now. And it is not hard to see why the judges are not enthusiastic about an extension for him.

Sharma has also made no special effort to please his political masters. Though Prime Minister Inder Gujral is no Deve Gowda and made no attempt to ask him to go easy on Prafulla Mahanta, it is clear that the United Front was not delighted by the CBI's dogged pursuit of a leading member of its steering committee. Nor are Assam Congressmen pleased by the CBI's reluctance to treat principal accused R.P. Bora as an approver in the LoC scam, so that the case against Mahanta is strengthened.

In a sense, this is how it should be. The bureau should not bother about political approval or disapproval. But the flip side is that nobody comes to your aid when you're under attack if you're perceived as 'uncooperative'.

Moreover, however dogged Sharma may be in his determination to run an apolitical, low-profile CBI, he is unlikely to make much difference in the long run. Many of the younger and brighter officers in the CBI have tasted blood. They have begun to see themselves as super-cops who can jail any politician they like with the support of the judiciary. They are not going to give up that power merely because a director, already nearing the end of his term, feels differently.

As long as the courts and the media want a headline-grabbing, shoot-from-the-hip kind of CBI, people like Sharma will make no difference. The tide is against them. And in any case, retirement is only a few weeks or a few months away. •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

THE ELIGIBLE

Whichever government comes to power, Mata Prasad is going to be the next Cabinet secretary

In the civil services, they joke about it. Watching the stream of well-wishers outside a certain office in the ministry of water resources, a joint-secretary remarked: they're all queueing up for *Mataji ki darshan*.

Inside his office, Mata Prasad, secretary water resources, listened impatiently as an old man droned on in a sycophantic tone: "The new year has been very lucky for you. There is no doubt that you will reach the highest office. There is no one who deserves it more than you." Prasad tried to shut him up by offering him a cup of tea but his well-wisher was determined to say his piece.

It is ironic that Prasad would be given the job that all IAS officers covet on the strength of the one card he has been hesitant to play all along: the Dalit factor

The bit of new year luck the old man was referring to was, of course, the fact that with barely a month to go before he retired, Prasad had been given a year's extension. To cut the red tape short, this meant that when the present Cabinet secretary, T.S.R. Subramaniam, retires in March this year, Prasad would still be around; and eligible for the job.

If one had to go strictly by seniority, then the job would go to Yogesh Chandra, former civil aviation secretary, another IAS officer from the 1962 batch. Again, on the question of merit, it would be hard to disqualify Chandra's candidature. However, there is no such crowd of well-wishers outside his office at the Indian Trade Promotion Organisa-

RUPINDER SHARMA

BUREAUCRAT

tion. That Prasad will be the next Cabinet secretary seems to be a foregone conclusion.

Regardless of whichever government comes into power? Asked a naive colleague in the civil services.

Well, for one, he was given an extension within 24 hours after Subramaniam's three-month extension was cleared by the Central Administrative Tribunal. While no one doubts Prasad's merit for the job, there is no dearth of other able IAS officers to take over as Cabinet secretary. And someone did take a lot of trouble to ensure that Prasad is in office at the time the government is looking for a new Cabinet secretary. In fact, there is little doubt that his clearance came from the highest level.

The question is — how high?

Prasad has long been considered Sitaram Kesri's man for the job. The two worked together as minister and secretary when Kesri was in charge of the welfare ministry. But at the time when Prasad's extension came through, any connection with Kesri was an embarrassment rather than a merit with the United Front (caretaker) government.

Again, because he was appointed chief secretary to the government of UP by Mayawati, it was alleged that Madam was just playing the Dalit card by nominating a fellow backward to the job. And when Prasad got his extension, there were those who claimed — unbelievable as it may sound — that Mayawati had pulled it off.

An angry Mulayam Singh Yadav took up the issue at the UF Steering Committee last week. Only he was told by a helpless I.K. Gujral that there was little either of them could do about it: the request had come from the President of India himself. A stunned Yadav had to take comfort from the fact that at least Gujral was not acting on Mayawati's recommendation.

This certainly goes against the above-politics and beyond-caste image of the Rashtrapati Bhavan that K.R. Narayanan has striven so hard to create (remember Uttar Pradesh?). But those who claim to be in the know say that this is precisely what has happened. If they are right, then it certainly answers the question raised earlier by Prasad's colleague: regardless of whichever government comes to power, the water resources secretary would get his 'promotion'.

It is ironic that Prasad would be given the job that all IAS officers covet on the strength of the one card he has been hesitant to play all along: the Dalit factor.

Though he comes from a Scheduled Caste family from Basti in UP, he entered the civil service through the general quota. And has risen from the ranks on merit. "In the late Eighties, when the then chief minister of UP Veer Bahadur Singh made Prasad home secretary, caste politics had not begun to dominate the state bureaucracy," says Chandrabhan Prasad, a Dalit activist and scholar.

Even today, say his friends, Prasad brushes aside well-wishers with an impatient smile. To those he can talk to, he explains that a mere extension does not mean he has the Cabinet secretaryship in his pocket. Yes, if he does get it, then it will all be due to God's will (certainly not the President of India's). In the meantime, God has been kind to him and he has no complaints.

In fact, add his friends, he is happiest when he is smoking his favourite Wills Navy Cut and reminiscing on the days when he was a sub-district magistrate. At that time, he did not even have a car to travel around in, but used to take buses. It was only much later in Lucknow when he was state home secretary that he purchased his first car for Rs 19,000. A car which he still owns.

Strange that Prasad would talk so much about a time that also brought in the darkest period of his career. It was in 1978, when he was SDM in Bareilly that he was suspended by Charan Singh for 'Emergency excesses'. The charge was that he authorised severe punishment to political prisoners.

He was later reinstated because nothing could be proved. Prasad's aides, however, claim that the whole case was the result of a political rivalry between the then SDM and Charan Singh's son-in-law who fought a Lok Sabha election from the state.

And when he is not thinking about the days that were — and of course, the days that will be — Mata Prasad is busy reading B.K. Nehru's autobiography. Nehru sums up his life with a '*BA kiya, naukri ki, pension mila, mar gaye*'.

Not quite. He forgot to add that bit about the '*extension mila*'. •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

Mayawati: backing a fellow backward?

The tiger tamed

Siddhartha Shankar Ray in his twilight years

He was known as the Butcher of Bengal who sent thousands of young men to their death in the Seventies, but became the darling of the Youth Congress. He advised Indira Gandhi to impose the Emergency and is not ashamed of admitting that it was probably on his advice that L.K. Advani was put in prison. He contested the predominantly Muslim Behrampore seat from West Bengal in the last Lok Sabha election and is now backing a party which is an ally of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Inconsistent? Siddhartha Shankar Ray can tell you that the sun rises in the west and you'll believe him.

This man once had Jyoti Basu's job. He went to the best schools, belonging as he did to Bengal's oldest and most respected families (C.R. Das was his grandfather). He had a far more illustrious career in law than Basu, he managed the affairs of the state Congress single-handedly, had good innings as a Governor and ambassador and even created a faction within the party loyal to him.

Such was his energy that he was expected to lead the Mamata Banerjee-created Trinamul Congress from up front, roaring against the gerontocracy that the Congress leadership has become (he himself is nearly 80, but those who know him say that with Ray, age is irrelevant). He had done this when he contested the 1984 election as an Independent from Darjeeling. Independent and vocal, Ray was known as the maverick of Bengal. Today when Bengal politics is seeing unprecedented realignments, what is keeping Ray so quiet?

It's a long story.

Indian politics no longer has any character. Kamlapati Tripathi was a character, as was Jagjivan Ram when he was in the Congress, and Veer Bahadur Singh. These men were independent leaders of huge constituencies, crossing barriers of caste, region, etc. Ray is a surviving character of Congress politics.

Those who know him say he can do anything. At the height of his powers, when he was leader of the Congress Legislature Party just before Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated, Ray woke up one day and decided not to do politics any more. So he quit the CLP, throwing the Congress into a crisis, and announced he was going back to his first love, law.

Later, when Narasimha Rao took over, Ray was appointed ambassador to the United States. He might have had a longer term in Washington, had he not decided to take it into his head that he wanted to return to politics.

So he came back and took up from where he left off, backing Mamata Banerjee against the rest in the West Bengal PCC because he genuinely believed that only Mamata had a mass following in Bengal politics. In fact, when Ray was in the US for three years, Banerjee lost her most vocal supporter. When Rao came to a rally held by her to sound the death knell of the Basu government despite the PCC's advice and the fact that Rao was having friendly talks with the Left Front, it was entirely at Ray's persuasion.

This time, when Mamata began telling the Congress that she wanted 21 seats for her candidates, it was Ray who backed her claim and arranged her meetings with Sonia Gandhi. In fact, Ray called on Sonia at least ten times pleading with her to intervene so that the Congress could be kept united.

However, none of it worked. Mamata chose to break away and announced that Sonia would be a big zero in Bengal. Still Ray didn't abandon her — until it was clear that Trinamul would be having seat adjustments with the BJP.

For Ray, two issues are non-negotiable. One is personal honesty. The other, secularism.

How honest can a person be? Ray is fickle and flamboyant. But even Jyoti Basu, his *bete noire*, concedes that he can never be corrupt. To this day, Ray fights all trade union cases free. One could argue that that is subserving other vested interests, but in Ray's mind, it is the right thing to stand up for the underdogs.

He acccepts payment only by cheque and even party funds are accepted only after receipts are given and the money accounted for. In fact, the representative of a business house who called on him when he was the CLP leader with Rs 2 lakh in a brown paper bag was taken aback to find Ray issuing a receipt for the money. When the agent wouldn't accept a receipt, Ray told him that he could take his money back.

Ray also can't compromise on secularism — call it minority-ism if you like. When he was chief minister he posted policemen in proportion to the religious composition of the population so that the police would be fair in a law-and-order crisis. He is also fighting the Babri Masjid Action Committee's case gratis. He is extremely popular among Muslims and had he canvassed for Trinamul, they might have forgiven Mamata for tying up with the BJP.

Today he's in a crisis. He cannot go with the BJP without compromising on his political honesty. And he cannot stay silent and watch his protege commit hara-kiri.

So, Ray is taking the middle path. He's keeping quiet, hoping that the BJP will go away and his party can wake up to resolve the struggle for power in the state Congress.

But the truth is, given the quality of Prime Ministers and Congress presidents in the last few years, Ray deserved much more than just working out patchwork solutions for his party in Bengal. He could have been a tiger. He's ended up mewing. •

TARAPADA BANERJEE

BIG BROWN

He is a nice man, people say.
Once in a while he even drops me to
school.
Though we hardly talk when in the car.
He is a nice man, people say.
But then they know nothing about
this belt of his.
It's a massive brown belt,
ending in a big brass buckle.
I hate that belt.
Even you would, if you saw your father
drunk,
and cracking a meter long piece
of leather
on your mother's back.
On a bad night, he holds that belt from the
other end of that big shiny buckle.
In the stillness of the night
I hear my mother cry.
Quietly.
But somehow the pain always reaches me.
Morning, everything is back to normal.
At least so it seems.
He even drops me to school.
Though we hardly talk when in the car.
But I have something to say --
will somebody please ask God not to have
nights ?
Will somebody please tell my father that
if the morning after he feels normal,
doesn't mean that so do we.
Will somebody? Please.

The man in question can be your brother, friend, colleague or neighbour.
Don't turn your back. Please. It's the question of a child's life.

HTA

ENCORE

One good thing about Vikram Seth is that he doesn't brood much. So what if the Booker eluded him? He is almost ready with his latest novel, *An Equal Music*. Set in London, it is the story of two young musicians and plays on various themes: music, nationality, deafness and love. The book, which will be published by Viking, is set to hit the stands in early 1999. Now, whether it will get the Booker is pure conjecture. But this much can be said: to his fans [illegible] thought of another Seth novel is music to the ears.

Seth: set for more

CAST PERFECT

Next time you think of calling the British racist, think again. You may have a very angry Saeed Jaffrey telling you not to be an ass. He would have his reasons of course: Jaffrey is the first Indian to play a major English role in British theatre, that too in something as upper crust as *My Fair Lady* now running at Crucible Theatre in Sheffield. He plays Colonel Pickering. Apparently, director David Sulkin wanted to be a little innovative with his casting, but pointed out that this could only happen with "good actors who have good imagination". Jaffrey, he said, "has both and plays Pickering to the manner born". Fine, but why Jaffrey? Pat comes the answer: "He sounded like a charming man. Colonel Pickering is an ex-phonetist, so it seemed appropriate."

That's syllogism, surely. But Jaffrey *is* pulling in packed crowds. Maybe, it's because of his attitude. "It's a very harmonious relationship," he said. "No ego trippers."

Jaffrey: charming guy

HAPPY FINALE

Not just drama, it was catharsis at Shriram's. The occasion was Lala Charat Ram's 80th birthday.

First the hubris: intra-family feuds that split the business empire. In the beginning it was Charat Ram vs elder brother Bharat, his alter ego in the DCM group. Then came the prodigal sons, Siddharth and Deepak, squabbling with their dad. Chests heaved as Siddharth broke down recalling his self-imposed exile and how he had fought for control over the group of companies which Charat Ram ran. Then Deepak cried as he spoke of how his father had trained them in the science of management.

Maybe, it had something to do with the ambience at Hotel Taj Palace, New Delhi, and the presence of so many of the city's glitterati. Or maybe, it was wisdom after folly: time can mellow even the bitterest of rancour.

Charat Ram: an end to rivalry

CHUCKED OUT!

There's tragedy brewing in the BCCI cup if you consider the dramatis personae. There's Kapil Dev, Sunil Gavaskar and, of course, the tragic protagonist, Rajesh Chauhan.

It all started with Chauhan being pulled up for 'chucking'. So he did time outside while an Indian panel comprising Kapil and Gavaskar deliberated. Chauhan was cleared and came back to play against Sri Lanka. That would have been the end of it except that, at this point, match referee Bobby Simpson decided that he too had something to say.

Chauhan: in a tangle

What ensued was another round of deliberations. To eliminate bias, India's representatives were left out. Then came the bombshell. Chauhan, they said, has a "problem with his bowling action". In cricket legalese, "a definite straightening of the arm just prior to delivery — which implies a throw under Note(a) of Law 24 of the Laws of Cricket." All too wordy for the game. But now Kapil's bristling. "If they doubt my integrity, I will prefer to resign," he said. It's difficult to be blase when your credibility is at stake. But the real loser is Chauhan, unless someone shows him the way out of this rather sordid mess.

I'M NO QUITTER

The problem with K.J. Alphons is he doesn't seem to learn. After he was suspended (and let's not go into that), the former DDA commissioner wrote his autobiography. It sank without a trace. Then he got together a few like-minded people like T.N. Seshan (that's another of those icon-busters) and Sushmita Sen and floated a Jan Jagaran Manch to fight corrupt politicians. That too flopped, and he formed an NGO to help Delhi's slum-dwellers. But nobody noticed.

That should have snuffed out all enterprise. It didn't. Judging from the number of times he has been spotted outside 10 Jan Path in the past few weeks, he has, apparently, decided on a final plunge.

But the question is: will anyone let him? Alphons himself is non-committal.

Alphons: now, is it politics?

"I have got offers," he said. "But I won't tell you now." That's a very safe line to take. If nothing works out, there's always one option: spewing righteous venom.

Himalayan plunder

A recent study makes shocking revelations about the smuggling of north Bengal flora and fauna

The two north Bengal districts of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling, richly endowed by nature with flora and fauna, have become the targets of international smugglers dealing in wildlife and forest products. As the area has borders with Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal, the rare species of animals as well as a wide variety of plants and flowers, butterflies and insects are poached and plundered regularly by well organised chains.

Among the diverse forms of life found in abundance in the hills and forests of the region are elephants, rhinos, deer, tigers, leopards and bears on the one hand, and trees such as sal, shimul, teak, panisaz, lampati, chikrasi, gamari, champ, etc., on the other. Rare medicinal plants also enrich the biodiversity of north Bengal.

Though forest wealth is being plundered for decades, the forest department and the government have chosen to look the other way resulting in irreparable losses not only to the national economy, but also to the fragile ecology of the region.

Last year, the state forest department entrusted a Delhi-based NGO, the Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI), to study the situation. The report of the study has been submitted recently.

The report clearly points out the centres of illegal wildlife trade in north Bengal. Marking Siliguri as the centre, it gives a detailed account of how the racket operates: "Siliguri traders handle the bulk of NE trade, often finance it and also handle transhipments of contrahands coming from Bhutan, the NE states or Calcutta to Nepal...In Siliguri Municipal Corporation area, the main points are Gurung Basti, Hyderpara, Champasari, 2nd Mile, Khalpara and parts of Burdwan Road. Several middlemen and petty traders operate from these areas."

The suburbs of Siliguri such as Sukna, Salugarah, Ambari, Bagdogra, Ghoshpukur and Mohorgaon-Gulma have also been listed as areas where the trade is going on. Mentioning Darjeeling as the largest trading centre next to Siliguri, the report says: "The presence of ready foreign buyers keeps the illegal trade thriving here, which is controlled

STEALING FIELDS

ANIMESH BOSE

An elephant poached in north Bengal's flourishing market

Ivory is smuggled from Orissa to Calcutta and then to Nepal, possibly via north Bengal. Ivory from north Bengal and the north-eastern states like Meghalaya is also routed through Siliguri

by well established business people of the town." It also notes that "reports of trade in Himalayan Black Bear cubs and gall bladder have been received from Kalimpong".

Some other centres in the Dooars of Jalpaiguri, Terai in Darjeeling and the neighbouring Cooch Behar district are also pinpointed in the report. These are: Banarhat, Madarihat, Falakata, Salkumar, Nagrakata, Jaigaon, Jhalong, Naxalbari, Panitanki, Kharibari, Tufanganj and Dinhata. Illegal trading in ivory, tiger skins, leopard skins and bones, bear bile and live leopard cubs flourishes in the Banarhat area. The Naxalbari, Panitanki and Kharibari near the Nepal border are being used as "transit point, storage place and major trading zone".

Though the actual volume of illegal trade could not be estimated, the study said that "the trade in leopard skins is the largest". The leopard bone business is not that large. The tiger skin trade is also reported to be growing.

According to the report, "Ivory trade

ANIMESH BOSE

In full bloom: flowers of profit

appears to have increased in West Bengal in recent times just as it has in other parts of the country...Rhino horn trade in north Bengal is the oldest wildlife trade. However, in the past four or five years the market has been flooded by so many fakes that a number of veteran traders have stopped dealing in horns."

Trading in bear bile, reptile skin, clouded leopard skin, snow leopard skin, deer skin, lesser cat skin, insects, orchids and medicinal plants have also been observed.

The forests of north Bengal are rich in medicinal plants. Many of these varieties are finding their way to foreign countries through unscrupulous dealers in spite of the ban on their export. These are *Sussurea lappa*, *Coptis tecra*, *Rauwolfia serpentia*, *Aquilaria malacceniss*, *Taxus wallichiana*, etc.

According to the WPSI, recent seizures of medicinal plants from the Calcutta port suggest that these are sent to Madras or Bombay for export. *Taxus wallichiana* is said to be smuggled to Nepal as well. Concern has been expressed over the finding that "even though extraction of the Himalayan Yew tree (*Taxus wallichiana*) from the wild has been prohibited in West Bengal, illegal extraction continues in Singalila Nation-

ANIMESH BOSE

Winged beauties: even they fall prey

Butterflies, moths and other insects are being smuggled out from north Bengal, Sikkim, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh to Japan and Germany with foreign tourists acting as conduits

al Park and Neora Valley National Park."

Some other floral species and herbs being extracted in Neora Valley National Park (Lava and Samsing areas), Buxa Tiger Reserve (Jayanti) and Gorumara National Park are *Aconitum spp.*, *Aristolochia spp.*, *Rhododendron spp.*, *Berberis aristata*, *Acorus spp.*, *Artemisia spp.*, *Costus speciosa*, *Didymocarpus pedicellata*, *Swertia chirata*, etc. The WPSI has recommended that "extraction of flora from protected areas should be brought under control immediately".

The trade routes have been traced, too. "Ivory is smuggled from Orissa to Calcutta and from here it reaches Nepal, possibly via north Bengal...Ivory from north Bengal and NE states like Meghalaya is also routed through Siliguri."

For tiger skins, the study has found, "Cuttack and Baripada to Calcutta is an established route...Tiger skins originate in north Bengal also, especially near Buxa and its vicinity. NE states are also suppliers of tiger skins. Finally tiger skins go to Nepal and Calcutta."

Only three seizures of tiger bones in India in the last two years has surprised the WPSI researchers as "there is enough evidence to suggest that tiger bone trade is very much active. In USA and in [illegible] Far Eastern countries tiger

ANIMESH BOSE

Hill orchids: alluring the mafia

bone medications are openly sold in pharmacy shops. This business obviously depends on a regular supply of tiger bones from India, which is home to 60 per cent of the wild tigers in the world".

The researchers have noted that "the increasing pressure on the government to indict poachers and traders of wildlife products have pushed trade in tiger bones underground. It is believed that the business in tiger bones is now conducted with extreme care and traders do not solicit new customers for their goods."

The seizure of 89 leopard skins brought from Kanpur at New Jalpaiguri shows that the traders keep changing routes. The leopards are also poached in north Bengal for their flesh, claws, paws and other parts. On 17 September, 1995, about 121 kg of leopard bones were seized at Gurung Basti in Siliguri.

Calcutta has been the main transit point for rhino horns traditionally. But in recent years, the study reveals, "the route has shifted to north Bengal". A total of 19 horns were seized in north Bengal between 1983 and 1997, as against only one in Calcutta (in 1995).

Even such endangered species as red pandas and high-altitude wild sheep and goats, e.g. serow, goral, etc., are killed for their skin, mainly in Sikkim and Bhutan, as well as in remote areas of the Nepal Himalayas which are not connected by road to Kathmandu. These are first brought to Siliguri or Darjeeling and then sent to Nepal via Pashupati or Panitanki border.

Not only body parts but also live animals find their way into the trade. The report says that these animals are sold to the neighbouring countries, travelling zoos, circuses and film studios. "These are transported from north Bengal and NE states and have to pass through north Bengal, though there has been no seizure. Leopard cubs from north Bengal are smuggled to Bhutan for safe keeping, but smuggled back when a customer has been found."

Butterflies, moths and other insects are being smuggled out from north Bengal, Sikkim, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh to Japan and Germany with some foreign tourists acting as conduits.

Recently, West Bengal forest minister Jogesh Burman admitted to journalists that though he was aware of the fact that forest produce and wildlife of north Bengal were being smuggled to foreign countries, his department was unable to take any positive measures to check it. He also could not deny the fact that a section of the forest officials was colluding in the illegal trade.

However, the minister could not say what concrete steps were being contemplated against the wildlife-mafia. All that he could assure was that the forest department would soon form an enquiry team to look into the whole affair. •

Iva Guha/Siliguri

Man in the Middle

Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and the political cross-currents in Assam

Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. The man in the middle. The man in a muddle. The man who could be just a gubernatorial nod away from losing his most prized political possession. The man who is ready to author a brand new volume in the Survival Series.

For the Assam chief minister, the ghost of the letter of credit (LoC) scam has come too close for comfort: it rests at Raj Bhavan, awaiting the sanction of Governor Lt-Gen. (retd) S.K. Sinha. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) just needs a final go-ahead from the Governor to charge-sheet Mahanta in the Demow treasury case of the multi-crore LoC scam.

If the deliberations in Dispur, the gossip in Guwahati, are any indication, the CBI vs Mahanta match will go down to the wire: regulation time is over; extra-time is underway; a tie-breaker is imminent; and a sudden-death lurks.

To say that Governor S.K. Sinha is taking his time over the case is the understatement of the New Year. Some say he is going over the CBI's presentment line-by-line. Others swear that he's busy reading between the lines. What is certain is that he is not leaving anything to chance. Sinha has sought a bagful of additional clarifications and documents from the CBI. He has also drawn up a not-so-short-list of some legal luminaries of the land, whom he intends to consult before taking a step.

The Governor's eagle eye, and legal line, could leave the CBI with some explaining to do. "He is blowing holes into the CBI's case. And there is no way he will sanction the CM's prosecution without being convinced that the case against Mahanta merits it," says an insider.

Also, timing is of the essence. With elections just about a month away, it is learnt that the Governor is unwilling to rock the political boat on the Brahmaputra at this critical juncture.

As all eyes remain riveted on Raj Bhavan, an uneasy calm descends over the political arena of Assam. The tremors,

RAJIB BASU

The CBI vs Mahanta play-off promises to go down to the wire: regulation time is over; extra-time is underway; a tie-breaker is imminent; and a sudden-death lurks

sporadic but significant, are the hints and forebodings of a gathering storm

At the centre of all controversy is a portly, bearded figure in white safari — hanging on, as if, for dear life. With every passing day, Mahanta is growing in confidence — the confidence of a condemned man fervently eyeing a fresh lease of life.

For Mahanta, 'to stay or not to stay' is not such a problematic 'question'. He is convinced about the appropriateness of an affirmative answer. But Assam and its people stand quite dramatically divided over the Mahanta matter. Some say he must go immediately; others grant him time till the charge-sheet comes through; the rest want him to go on and on.

Why back a man accused of corruption and inefficiency? The reasons are neither too simple to shrug off, nor too complex to comprehend. They range from petty political gains to basic issues of living.

A coterie that is desperate for "the chief/supremo" to continue in office is, of course, the one that virtually lives off him — basking in reflected glory and sharing the spoils. There is another, smaller group of true loyalists of the "gentleman politician".

And then there is a section which firmly believes that Prafulla Mahanta must stay if peace is to be given a realistic chance in Assam. In his brand new avatar of aggressor, Mahanta has taken the fight to the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). There have been loud protests — over his "failed promises" to the people; the "repressive methods" of his Unified Command, etc., etc. — but the indisputable fact is that the army-administration offensive has kept the ULFA relatively quiet during the last 12 months.

"No political leader in Independent India has shown the kind of political will to fight insurgency that Mahanta has over the last year," declares chief secretary V.S. Jafa. What Jafa leaves unsaid is that Mahanta's fall could derail the peace process, with disastrous consequences.

Already, the signs are ominous. The ULFA's presence is being increasingly felt, seen, and heard these days. Sensing that Mahanta had been thrown off balance by the LoC scandal and outraged over general-secretary Anup Chetia's arrest in Bangladesh, the ULFA has made its move. A series of attacks — in and around Guwahati — have signalled the banned outfit's intentions. A 12-hour *bandh* call by the ULFA on 8 January paralysed life in the Brahmaputra valley. Rallies in support of the ULFA are becoming visible once again in some 'strategic' districts. With 26 January sure to be a D-Day for the ultras, fear (and sandbags) has returned to Guwahati. And with Mahanta struggling for his own survival, things can only get worse.

The other argument trotted out in favour of the Assam chief minister is that he is "relatively less corrupt". This curious complement no longer sounds

strange in the Indian political context. "He is not like the others because he has not really made money for himself. He must have used the LoC money for his poll campaign, but then which politician does not take money from businessmen to fight elections?" demands an industrialist in Guwahati.

Continuing with the relativity model, Mahanta has another definite thing going from him: the fact that there is no visible viable alternative to him in the AGP. His years on political centre-stage, and more importantly, his recent crash-course in central politics (as a member of the United Front core committee) have given the Assam CM the stature of a statesman-in-the-making. No other local leader can measure up. The fact that Mahanta has established a rapport with "national leaders" like I.K. Gujral, Deve Gowda, Chandrababu Naidu and Jyoti Basu (the last two being role models of sorts) means a lot to many in Assam.

If (or maybe when) the CM does take a tumble, it could throw open the doors to political turmoil and do immense harm to Assam's cause. So, in the 'larger' interest of the state, the present incumbent must continue, feels the pro-Mahanta lobby.

This is vehemently, often violently, opposed by the Mahanta-*hatao* lobby. This group accuses the Assam CM of being a "traitor to a cause",

Mahanta (left) with I.K. Gujral in Guwahati: the Delhi connection

Armymen in Assam: war of attrition

"betrayer of a people", "corrupt", "autocratic", "manipulative".

Among his most virulent critics today are those who have been closest to him, who shared and lived with him the dream of a new Assam. Whether AGP rebel Bhrigu Kumar Phukan or mediaman Ajit Kumar Bhuiyan; editor Kanak Deka or educationist Hiren Gohain; AJYCP president Bimal Prasad Choudhury or the popular Adip Phukan; the AASU hierarchy or the United Minorities Front (UMF) leadership; the Sadou Assam Karmachari Parishad (SAKP) or those fighting for "progressive regionalism" — are all disillusioned with Mahanta and his style of functioning.

The common complaint from these pressure groups is that Mahanta is "no longer one of us". They do have a point. In this his second term, the Assam CM has hopped-skipped-and-jumped from Dispur to Delhi and, in some way, left his past behind. In doing so, he has alienated himself from "his people", irked the intelligentsia, and provoked his political-partners-of-old.

No wonder then that the anti-Mahanta forces are marshalling their troops. The AASU (though considerably mollified after the voters list episode), the AJYCP, the UMF, and other "like-minded" organisations and individuals have begun mobilising public opinion against "Mahanta's misrule".

The Opposition Congress is, still, enemy number one for Mahanta. The state unit of the party has turned on the heat, demanding the CM's head, and President's Rule in Assam. Trumpets Tarun Gogoi, APCC president: "Mahanta must go...the sooner the better for Assam, and for him."

But the Congress in Assam is in no real position to force the issue. "This is a political conspiracy by the Congress and big business groups like Tata Tea to defame me and destabilise my government," Mahanta reiterates.

There are many who do believe that there is "a larger game-plan" at work to play up the LoC scam and trap Mahanta, who was assuming a position of alarming strength in Assam. Only "political pressure" could have forced the CBI to suddenly get its act together against the Assam CM, they feel. The strict timetable set by the Guwahati High Court definitely helped matters along.

Others see a more "sinister design". Insurgency is, after all, the north-east's biggest indigenous 'industry'. People from every walk of life — politics, business, media, pressure groups, etc. — are, allegedly, beneficiaries of this booming business. "Mahanta is posing a direct threat to all those who are encashing the blank cheque of insurgency in the north-east," observes one of the CM's men.

Yet, no one really disputes the fact that the Assam CM did take money and favours from the scamsters. "Forget the conspiracy theory. What matters is that Mahanta stands accused of corruption. The people know that he is corrupt. He must step down immediately," stresses Bhrigu Phukan.

Governor S.K. Sinha: taking his time

That Mahanta will not do, at least not before the Governor gives the sanction for his prosecution. The anti-Mahanta gang is now devising ways and means to get the case back into the Guwahati High Court so that a Bench can urge the Governor to speed up matters. Otherwise, by the look of things, Mahanta is 'safe' till the elections.

In clingling on to his chair in the face of imminent prosecution, Mahanta appears to be going the Laloo Prasad Yadav way. On the face of it, Laloo and Mahanta appear to have absolutely nothing in common. The brash Bihari vs the amiable Assamese. One a consummate showman, with his laugh-a-minute public performances, the other an introvert, with nearly non-existent communicative skills, and distinctly uncomfortable under the probing public eye.

But in a strange way, their political sagas read alike. In their own ways, both swept to power on the strength of massive popular mandates, very much the people's choice; both have learnt about the pitfalls of power the hard way; both stand accused of corruption, nepotism and inefficiency; both are vehement in the protestations of being "clean" and vitriolic in their attack on political adversaries who are plotting their downfall; both have lost old friends and made new enemies; both have tasted power at the state and national levels and are desperate not to let go of either.

While Laloo has already lost his crown (though only to his wife); Mahanta is still struggling to keep his in place. He is walking the corridors of uncertainty. If he negotiates this, without losing his head, there could be no stopping him.

"After this, if he starts working sincerely for the people of Assam, Mahanta will become an immovable force," feels AASU president Sarbananda Sonowal.

Sunil Nath, formerly Siddharta Phukan (ULFA's high-profile publicity secretary) sums up one side of the story: "Mahanta has come a long, long way. And once he sorts this out, he will go a long, long way."

But that's in the future which is neither his nor ours to see. For now, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta has a clear and present danger to avert. How he does it will decide his political destiny. •

Sumit Das Gupta with Dilip Chandan/Guwahati

Killing fields

Ruined by pests, Andhra Pradesh's cotton farmers commit suicide to escape the burden of debt

A cotton farmer in Warangal district facing starvation

Since the middle of December, swarms of Spodopetra in Andhra Pradesh have reduced cotton output from 15 quintal per hectare to three quintal. In its wake has come a spate of suicides, the number touching 27 in Warangal district alone

On the night of 16 December, the people of Komaram village in the Atmakur *mandal* in Andhra Pradesh's Warangal district were woken up by the heart-wrenching wail of a young woman. It came from the house of a farmer they called Nelutala Ravi, a cotton cultivator. And once the curious and flustered neighbours rushed to his house, they could hardly believe their eyes.

Nelutala was dead. The young farmer — he was barely 30 — had killed himself by consuming mono-cropophos, a deadly poison. Nelutala lay sprawled on the floor, lifeless. His bewildered, two-year-old daughter clung to his 25-year-old wailing, hysteric wife. Mallamma, Nelutala's 70-year-old mother, sobbed silently.

It was a terrible but not an isolated tragedy. Nelutala was just one among several cotton farmers who had chosen to kill themselves rather than face the moneylender. And since then, their number has only kept growing. As SUNDAY went to press, the toll had already touched 45.

All these farmers had run up huge debts by borrowing heavily to purchase pesticides to save their crop. The pesticide was needed as their standing cotton crop was under attack from a pest called the Spodopetra (*ladde purugu*).

The pest stalked the cotton fields during the day and devoured thousands of cotton plants at night. They munched away everything — leaves, stems and flowers — leaving the fields devastated and the farmers ruined. "They hide in the ground to keep away from sunlight but come out at night and attack the fields. We have, at times, burnt the pests in baskets-full. But they came back the next day, from the 4,000 eggs laid by each female," says Rangya Naik of Nandinayak Thanda.

Since 12 December, swarms of Spodopetra in Andhra Pradesh have reduced cotton yields from 15 quintal per hectare to a mere three quintal. And in the wake of this catastrophe has come a spate of suicides, the number touching 27 in Warangal district alone. Faced with the spectre of penury and starvation, 47 people have chosen to end their lives, after the cotton crop was devoured by pests. "There were 11 cases of suicide in the last 11 days. And the number increased after the chief minister visited the affected areas," said Saradaj Mallayya, who lost his brother in the Nagaram village.

For some unexplained reason, the Spodopetra attack has been the most severe in the rainfed cotton fields than in those that are irrigated. When asked why this was so, all that district collector Shalini Mishra could say was: "Ask the pests." Of the 61,000 acre in Warangal district, nearly 43,000 acre were rainfed and the rest were irrigated.

Earlier, the district administration had identified Helothis as a pest that attacked cotton plantations. Spodopetra was believed to afflict only the groundnut crop. In fact, in June 1997, swarms

of Spodopetra had attacked the state's groundnut crop. At that time, the agricultural extension division had swung into action and had successfully fought the menace.

In early December last year, there was a bout of unusual rain for a week which caused fungal growth and accumulation of moisture on the ground. This invited the Spodopetra to return and nest in the cotton fields. Initially, the farmers as well as the administration ignored the phenomenon. They hadn't imagined that the pest could also attack cotton.

It took some time for them to realise that the pests were indeed after the castor plants in the cotton fields. The bushy RCH-2 hybrid cotton plants and the wide castor leaves were ideal hosts for Spodopetra, the females of which lay 4,000 eggs at a time.

"Only when the farmers found that the cotton flowers and leaves were disappearing, did they raise a hue and cry. They went immediately to the pesticides dealer and bought whatever variety they could lay their hands on, and at exorbitant prices. When the Spodopetra refused to relent, the farmers used traditional insecticides like a mixture of rice bran and jaggery," said Malla Gowd, agricultural officer of Parkal.

And this, to a very great extent, was the cause of their complete ruination. The excessive use of pesticides sharply increased the cost of cultivation. "Earlier, a mere Rs 3,000 was being spent in agricultural operations and Rs 4,000 on fertilisers. The pest menace made the cost of pesticides shoot up from Rs 3,000 to Rs 8,000, driving the farmer to a point of no-return. Disaster struct when the yield per hectare fell from 15 quintal to a mere three quintal," says Lakshminarasappa of Keshavpuram, a cultivator.

So far, the role of the administration has been insensitive to say the least. Even though the pests are raging and farmers are killing themselves to escape the debt burden, the government is yet to begin the "free spraying of pesticides" as promised by the chief minister. At the moment, committees are being formed to gauge the extent of the disaster, and the actual spraying is likely to begin only by the end of January. "We have two more pickings of cotton left and the plant has to be nourished for the harvesting of the second crop by the end of July. At the present rate, we may even have to burn the plants," says Pramadhya Naik of Nandanaik Thanda. In many cases, the state government is yet to disburse the ex gratia compensation to ease the hardship faced by the farmers.

The Warangal district administration, however, points out that the CM's offer of paying compensation has brought to light the fact that not all the suicide cases were linked to the cotton disaster. "Of the 27 reported cases, only eight to 11 pertain to cotton farmers," points out the district collector. As a result, each case is being scrutinised, and succour is naturally getting delayed.

While the government is yet to ascertain the damage caused by pests in other districts, the farmers are caught between loan sharks and pesticide dealers. In Warangal district alone, there are 13,000 shops which distribute pesticides produced by 93 companies and as well as 200 other proscribed units located in Maharashtra. "The government has no control over the distribution of pesticides. We come to the scene only when there is a scarcity leading to a law and order problem," say district police officials.

Meanwhile, the suicides have become a poll issue for the Opposition parties who blame the Chandrababu Naidu government for the delayed action. They feel that the CM was too busy with his pet Janmabhoomi programme till the first week of January. The ruling Telugu Desam Party (TDP) is also blamed for denying benefits to farmers who were not its supporters.

The Opposition parties have demanded a debt write-off from cooperative banks and as well as the waiver of the private debts. The People's War Group, too, has demanded a moratorium on rural debts. As for the other Left parties, they have urged the TDP government to provide houses and jobs to affected families.

But there is a problem. With elections round the bend, the government may find it difficult to fulfil these demands without attracting censure from the Election Commission for the supposed violation of the code of conduct.

"At the moment, the scenario is bleak," says a senior official. •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Warangal

Family members of Nelutala Ravi: devastated

The cotton farmers had run up huge debts by borrowing heavily to purchase pesticides to save their crop. The pesticide was needed as their standing crop was under attack from Spodopetra

The end o

Sixteen Bangladeshi children sold off to the Middle East were rescued by the Delhi Police. That's when their tale of horror began

RUPINDER SHARMA

Some of the Bangladeshi children rescued by the Delhi Police: the victims of a crim

"I was going to ride a camel," four-year-old Alam informed us with a hint of a smile in his eyes.

It was hard to return the smile. We knew what Alam didn't: he'd also been pretty close to riding to his death.

In September last year, Delhi Police rescued 16 children (Alam included) from a small room in Okhla Vihar. They were Bangladeshi kids en route to Dubai to take part in one of the Middle East's most barbaric sports — camel races.

The children act both as jockeys and spurs. The lighter the child the better, for the heavy ones tend to weigh down the camel. They are tied to the camel and as the loosely-bound child tosses from one side to other he spurs the camel into running faster. More importantly, the louder the child cries, the better the camel performs. Most of them fall off before the ride ends and the lucky ones are trampled to death under the camels' hooves.

The Sriniwaspuri police had worked on a tip-off, rounding up all the children and 13 adults accompanying them. Most of the adults (booked under the Foreigners Act for not possessing valid travel documents), claimed guardianship of one child or another.

The children were bundled off by the police to the dingy confines of Sriniwaspuri Police Station. After being shunted repeatedly between different courts, including one trip to the Juvenile Court, they were finally produced before the duty magistrate on 12 September. The magistrate remanded the adults to Tihar Jail and for some strange reason, decided to throw the children in there as well.

That is when the People's Rights Organisation (PRO), a human rights group, appeared on the scene. They filed a public interest litigation and two days later, ten of the 16 children were shunted to Prayas, an observation home for neglected juveniles. (Six children could not be removed because they were too young to be separated from those who claimed to be their mothers).

Prayas is nicer than jail, says seven-year-old Iqbal, but no, he doesn't like being there. "I came with Kaka," he said with great reluctance, lips quivering. And does his Kaka treat him well? Yes, he nodded. Far too readily. Even as his face crumpled. Then, after a long silence he said, "*Kaka mare* (Kaka beats me)."

Only three years older than Iqbal, Maqbool Hussain is uncannily perceptive for his age. All of four feet (or almost) and ten years old, he is the eldest of the lot. "*Police dekhe Alamgir dal shate paliye gechche* (Alamgir ran away with his gang when he saw the police)," he reveals. Alamgir, it appears, is the mysterious man who lured his brothers and mother with job offers in Dubai. His two younger brothers and mother were still in jail.

But Maqbool is confident of returning home soon.

innocence

RUPINDER SHARMA

have been treated like criminals

DR AUROBINDO GHOSH

"Dumping innocent children in prison without any fault on their part is in gross violation of the Juvenile Justice Act, 1986 and the Delhi jail manual"

The confidence was touching. And despite a harrowing four-month wait in an alien country, it hadn't waned one bit. Not even when they had been treated like criminals themselves.

B.S. Gahlaut, chairman of the Juvenile Welfare Board, witnessed part of the trauma. On 12 September, at about 4.30 pm, he happened to hear the cries of children inside the premises of the court. "When I entered the court, I was shocked to see 15-16 children and two women crying with pitifully folded hands before the magistrate. It was barbarous ... a contingent of around 20 policemen, heavily armed with rifles and Sten guns, surrounding the terrified children," he recalls.

It needn't have been so. According to the Juvenile Justice Act of 1986, police officials who rescued the children should have brought them to the Juvenile Welfare Board within 24 hours and not to a police station or jail. Their being produced before a magisterial court, and then being sent to jail instead of a observation home are all violations of different provisions of the Juvenile Justice Act (Sections 13 and 18).

When a four-member team from PRO visited Tihar Jail on the evening of 19 September, they were shocked by what they saw. Says PRO's Dr Aurobindo Ghose, "The children looked miserable... some of them even started crying. Dumping innocent children in prison without any fault on their part is in gross violation of the Juvenile Justice Act, 1986 and the Delhi jail manual."

But for the ten children at Prayas, things seem to be looking up at long last. According to Rekha Palli, defence counsel for ministry of external affairs, the Bangladesh embassy has given instructions on 9 January for their repatriation. Palli will now move an application in the court for the transfer of those children to the Bangladesh embassy. The fate of the six younger children in Tihar still hangs in a balance.

But four-year-old Alam, so excited about the camel race he didn't get to participate in, is still a happy soul. When Iqbal refused to talk, he kept popping up from behind and saying, "*Ha, maa bhalo bashe*, (Yes, mother loves me)."

Says Prayas manager, Ajay Singh: "Most children have a traumatised expression by the time they reach here. But these children were a lovely sight. They jumped out of the van and came trooping into the home. As excited as if they were on a picnic."

Some of them are still as excited. And it's infectious. Other children in the home walk up to us and ask, "*Aap inko lene aaye hai? Yeh to kab se tayyar bathe hai* (Have you come to take them? They're all dressed up and ready to go)."

Soon, they will be home. If crossing the border to a vast thing known as one's country can be called home, that is. None of them have an address to go back to. And none of them realise that they are headed for another juvenile facility back home.

And Alam, the youngest of the lot, does not even know that some elder back home — possibly his own father — had sold him off to die at the camel races.

A trip abroad. A few days and nights in Tihar Jail. Not many people can boast of it in a lifetime. Four-year-old Alam is still a child. At ten years, Maqbool Hussain is an adult. How long before Alam grows up too? •

Chitralekha Dhamija/New Delhi

Fragile republic

With four governments falling in three years, Nepal pauses on the brink of election

The New Year surprise for Nepal was the sudden collapse of the five-term Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa's 90-day-old Rashtra Prajatantra Party (RPP) and Nepali Congress (NC) government, the shortest-lived in the history of Nepal. This was the fourth government from the same House to fall in three years. That is not all. It has used up all options of forming one more viable government from the same House.

But King Birendra had to "explore all possibilities of forming a government from within the existing House" as per the landmark judgement given by Justice V.N. Upadhya on 10 September, 1995. This judgement restored Parliament as it was on 13 June, 1995 after being dissolved by the King on the recommendation of the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist), CPN(UM-L) Prime Minister Manmohan Adhikari, in accordance with Article 53(4) of the Nepalese Constitution of 1990.

Thapa tried to do a Adhikari in recommending dissolution of the House to preempt a no confidence motion. This time, the difference was that the no-confidence motion was registered in the Royal Palace only after Thapa had met the King and already recommended dissolution and holding of fresh elections.

There was anxiety and euphoria in Nepal over the unique power-sharing arrangement between Thapa and Koirala in the outgoing government. Each was to be PM for 11 months with Koirala in office at the time of elections

The sequence of events took a bizarre turn when five RPP ministers resigned and along with three MPs, met the election commissioner to inform him that they had formed a separate party — the Chand faction. The UML immediately staked claim to form a new government, reminding the King that Article 42(1) of the Constitution was still available.

The Constitution of Nepal, 1990, contains three critical provisions. Article 42 deals with the formation of governments including the contingency of a hung House. Article 53 relates to summoning and prorogation of sessions and dissolution of the House. And Article 59 relates to vote of confidence and a no-confidence motion.

It gives the King discretion by using the words 'may' and 'shall' to interpret the Constitution and recommendations of the Prime Minister. For example, Article 53(4) states, "His Majesty may dissolve the House of representatives on the recommendation of the Prime Minister." On the other hand, Article 42 (all the four clauses) is driven by the word 'shall.' The discretion invested in the King was circumscribed by the Upadhya judgement.

By now, King Birendra is well versed both in the game of musical chairs played by the political parties and his own constitutional powers. The present impasse is not so much over forming a government as about becoming a caretaker government. The battle being fought around the Narayanhity Palace is about who will hold office at the time of the next mid-term elections

The award for political skulduggery in 1997 must go to RPP which has scooped all the advantage from a hung House and also rubbished constitutional politics in reducing democracy to a joke. It has also become the first major party to split. At the same time, the other parties have not behaved like angels. They have equally discredited democracy and are badly divided. The verdict of the people of Nepal as received by me on a trek through Nepal last month is that democracy has failed to deliver.

This is the predominant view echoed by the rural heart of Nepal. The villagers liken politics to football, Nepal's favourite sport. The people are simply fed up with politics and with politicians for not keeping the promises made to them. One of the main causes of the Maobadi insurgency in west Nepal is this.

The failure of democracy has restored the primacy of monarchy and enhanced the image of the King. Rishikesh Shah, a former foreign minister and now a human rights activist says, "The Constitution is not working. Courts, Parliament and political parties have lost their legitimacy. The King is the only symbol of popular and traditional legitimacy." The Constitution, he adds, "was a gift to the people from the King It needs to be changed".

Rishikesh Shah: "The Constitution was a gift to the people from the King. It needs to be changed"

Chakra P. Bastola: He predicted the fall of the government

Now King Birendra is well versed both in the popular game of musical chairs and his own constitutional powers

There is an opposite view. Veteran journalist Gopal Sharma says democracy and its institutions have worked. Only the politicians and leaders have failed it. "After all, Nepal has had only seven years of democracy of which one was an interim administration. The King has acted as a constitutional monarch, gone by the advice of the Prime Minister and been above board."

There was anxiety and euphoria in Nepal over the unique power-sharing arrangement between Thapa and Girija Prasad Koirala in the outgoing government. Each was to be Prime Minister for 11 months with Koirala in office at the time of elections. All ministers held by UML in the Chand government went to NC. All RPP MPs except Chand and S.B. Lawati became ministers in the government. All this was too good to be true.

Chakra P. Bastola, a former NC minister, had predicted the fall of the government five weeks ago. He had said "power-sharing will fail because of the Chand faction of the RPP." That is precisely what happened.

A second message received by me in the course of my travels was that UML would win the mid-term poll — certainly becoming the single-largest party, and with a bit of luck, might even be able to form a government without outside support.

Political parties in Nepal are in poor health, some terminally ill. NC is bedevilled by the unrequited ambition of K.P. Bhattarai of becoming an elected Prime Minister in his lifetime. With the demise of the supreme leader, Ganesh Man Singh, the NC troika has dissipated. Bhattarai commands the support of some 30 to 34 MPs, once called Chautisiye, while Koirala leads the group of Chhiattare (76). The rivalry between these old foxes is unending and self-destroying. It could split the NC, which may not be a bad thing.

The UML is also sharply divided between moderates led by Madhav Nepal and the extreme Left by Bamdev Gautam. The other smaller parties are similarly infected.

Since there is little useful life left in the present House, the King has acted wisely and constitutionally in ending it.

The dilemma of democracy in Nepal is similar to that of its monarch. "History has a King who cannot bear to see himself as King. He cannot be himself because he does not know who he is." •

Maj.Gen. Ashok K. Mehta/Kathmandu

At long last, India and UAE decide to sign an extradition treaty

Saleem Sherwani: man of the hour?

PARTNERS I

If everything goes well, by 15 February Indian diplomacy will have taught the world a valuable lesson: that in dealings with the Gulf, it takes only 12 years for the wheels of history to come full circle.

After 12 years of humming and hawing, giving and taking, India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have set 15 February as the date for signing an extradition treaty between the two countries. No other bilateral agreement negotiated by India since Independence has been as controversial or caused such extended speculation as the document finalised and initialled between India and UAE on 25 November last year, finally committing the two countries to bringing criminals in each other's territory to justice.

But there may still be that proverbial slip between the cup and the lip since the occasion for signing the agreement is the meeting of the Indo-UAE Joint Commission scheduled to be held in New Delhi next month. The commission, headed by ministers, may very well be postponed with a caretaker government in power and the country right in the middle of an election.

Besides, there is a deep divide within the UAE government on the advisability of signing the agreement with India. At the operational level, the UAE's law-enforcement agencies are convinced that India is not sincere about extradition from or to the UAE and that the police in various Indian states supposed to implement the agreement will not cooperate with their Gulf counterparts.

In the face of such stiff opposition, the initialling of the agreement was made possible only by the intervention of the UAE's political leadership whose considerations were geopolitical and larger.

The UAE's law-enforcement agencies cannot, after all, be faulted for their scepticism. In India, where public memory is short and institutional memory within the government even shorter, few people now remember that in the mid-1980s it was the UAE which was very keen on a legal framework to have criminals extradited from India to the Emirates and vice versa.

At the root of the UAE's enthusiasm for an extradition agreement 12 years ago was the desire of the government of Dubai, a key component of the federation that makes up the country, to make an example of an Indian who had betrayed the trust of the Emirate's closely-knit ruling family.

This Indian, for several decades, had worked for a commercial arm of the ruling family which was running Dubai airport and was acting as the general sales agent (GSA) for most airlines operating through the Emirate. One fine day, this Indian, a native of Kerala, disappeared from Dubai and the ruling family discovered that over several years, he had misappropriated several million dollars.

The family felt betrayed. But their efforts through normal channels to get him back to Dubai for trial came to nought. India showed little interest in seeing that this travesty of justice was corrected.

Shortly afterwords, an Indian Airlines plane was hijacked by Khalistani terrorists and taken from India to Pakistan and later to Dubai where the hijackers surrendered.

Enter Romesh Bhandari, then a secretary in the ministry of external affairs, but more importantly, a high-flying diplomat claiming strong Middle-Eastern connections and enjoying the confidence of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Bhandari flew into Dubai with great fanfare and flew out with the hijackers. It was for the first time in the violent history of hijacking worldwide that those responsible for an act of air piracy had been repatriated to their country of origin.

Bhandari scored this remarkable feat by promising the Dubai government that as soon as he returned to India, he would similarly send back the fugitive Malayalee for trial in Dubai. But once he was back from Dubai, Bhandari conveniently forgot his promise and concentra-

ted his energies on using his success in bringing back the hijackers to lobby with Indira Gandhi for the job of foreign secretary.

The Dubai government once again felt let down by India, but through the Abu Dhabi-based Central government of the UAE, they decided to pursue the logical diplomatic option of having an extradition agreement with India.

Surprisingly, India was not interested. It was also the time when the Bofors scandal was beginning to cloud the Indian political horizon and eventually, Win Chadha, who represented Bofors in India, moved to Dubai.

Sure enough, India asked Dubai to repatriate Chadha home. But this request was followed by a visit by a minister in the Rajiv Gandhi government, who clearly told the UAE government that India was really not interested in getting Chadha back. He said the extradition request was merely for the record.

It was then that the UAE government was shocked into full awareness of India's doublespeak on extradition. There have been other examples.

A Gujarati servant working for an

Win Chadha: sought for the sake of form?

N JUSTICE!

Indian family in Dubai murdered the entire family including small children, and fled to Ahmedabad. India refused to send him back to Dubai for trial.

The popular belief in India is that the UAE has been dragging its feet on an extradition treaty with India making it expedient for men like Dawood Ibrahim to seek shelter there.

The truth is quite the opposite. For the better part of the last decade, it was the UAE which was keen on creating a legal framework with India to bring criminals to justice while India torpedoed every effort at every level to facilitate such an agreement.

It was not until the serial bomb blasts in Bombay in March 1993 that India showed any interest in concluding an extradition treaty with the UAE. Unfortunately, by then the UAE had lost all interest in doing so. What was worse, the UAE authorities had become extremely bitter about the attitude of the Indian police in many states — an attitude which was interpreted in Dubai and Abu Dhabi as being hand in glove with the criminals who had a lot of money as non-resident Indians (NRIs) to keep themselves out of jail.

Romesh Bhandari: false start

What was it then that brought about a change of heart in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, making it possible after 12 years of negotiations to finally conclude the agreement? Ironically, it's nothing to do with good relations between India and the UAE. It was a third country which made the agreement possible: Iran.

The UAE is paranoid about Iran, and a simmering dispute between the two countries over three islands has been a constant source of tension in the Gulf ever since the Islamic Revolution in Tehran. So, when I.K. Gujral visited the UAE early last year as external affairs minister, his counterpart in the Emirates gingerly raised the issue of what they saw as flourishing ties between India and Iran.

It was not until the Bombay serial blasts in March '93 that India showed any interest in concluding an extradition pact with the UAE

Gujral's response made the UAE even more apprehensive about Indo-Iranian relations, and it was decided at the highest level in Abu Dhabi that a grand gesture of friendship with India was needed to balance Indo-Iranian ties in favour of the Arab side of the Persian Gulf.

Later in the year, when minister of state for external affairs, Saleem Sherwani, visited Abu Dhabi, his counterpart Shaikh Hamdan bin Zayed, a son of the UAE President, told Sherwani that his country would, after all, sign the extradition agreement. The law-enforcement agencies in the UAE are still sceptical. But the wheels of history had come full cirlce. •

K.P. Nayar/New Delhi

V. GANGADHAR

The Italian

Why is Sonia Gandhi so important to our media?

Indian media are full of 'Sonia experts'. I had always wanted to meet one of these, particularly the female of the species. Recently, I had my wish fulfilled. The 'Sonia expert' I met was middle-aged, very 'liberal' and 'intellectual', fully committed to women's causes. But not to the cause of Sonia Gandhi. Here is what we discussed:

SE: I don't know what I would have done without Sonia Gandhi. Perhaps changed professions, gone into advertising.

VG: That is surprising. It was clear from your writings that you did not like her one bit and held her personally responsible for everything that is wrong with the country.

Sonia's Italian connection is bad. Remember, Italy is the land of the mafia. Further, she keeps her mouth shut, mine is always open. When everything in Indian politics and the media is so undignified, how can she be so dignified?

SE: That is exactly what I mean! In the absence of Sonia Gandhi, I would not have been able to write a single word.

VG: What is behind this fixation?

SE: Oh, she is Italian. Wants to convert the land of Ram into Rome. She is the Sphinx, the Dynasty, the Queen. I link her with Bofors, several scams and the decline of the Congress.

connection

VG: Phew! As a liberal, why are you so obsessed with her being an Italian? You have married outside your community. I thought people like you encouraged such trends.

SE: But I do not belong to the Dynasty. We can marry anyone we want to or live together and produce love-children. But the Italian connection is bad. Remember, Italy is the land of the mafia. Further, she keeps her mouth shut, mine is always open. When everything in Indian politics and the media is so undignified, how can she be so dignified? It is a put-on act.

VG: Strong words!

SE: Of course. But there are advantages for mediapersons like me to have Sonia around. I have an opportunity to use the few Italian words I know quite well. Have you ever read my comments on her without the words pasta, 'Mama mia', 'Ciao', spaghetti and Quattrochhi. Along with Sphinx, Dynasty and Queen, my copy is complete. Occasionally I add 'weeping widow'.

VG: Is it difficult to become a 'Sonia expert'?

SE: Of course, it is. Requires hard work, dedication, bile and vitriol in the system, a touch of contempt. Your eyes need to be a bit greenish. Plus oodles of prejudice. *(Lowering her voice)* I have all the details of the commissions that woman received when she was working as an insurance agent.

VG: Anything wrong in that? So many people had worked as insurance agents.

SE: Hmmph. And the things that went on under the name of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation?

VG: Have you ever visited the foundation and found out about the work it has been doing?

SE: I can't do that. That will be objective and fair journalism. It does not go well with our kind of Sonia coverage.

VG: Reading your columns one would never believe that Sonia had the misfortune to have her husband blown up into bits by terrorist bombs or her mother-in-law drilled by bullets from her own security personnel.

SE: These do not bother me. I concentrate on atrocities on tribal women. Oh, it is getting late. I must do my daily 1,000 words on the Sphinx. Mama mia, it is late!

In search of Vajpayee

The editors of a national newspaper chain have been instructed by their management to cover the election campaign of BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee themselves and publish at least one 'exclusive' interview with him everyday till he is sworn in as Prime Minister. This has created consternation among some of them:

Editor (English): Jalgaon, Dhule, Beed, Sawantwadi... Where are these places? Do they really exist?

Editor (Marathi): Of course, right in the heart of Maharashtra. This is a great opportunity for you to mingle with the masses.

Editor (English): Hmmph. Who wants to mingle with the masses? I was under the impression that the civilised world did not extend beyond Warden Road and Peddar Road in Bombay. Will it be possible to get continental food in these godforsaken places? I wish I had been asked to cover poll campaigns in New Jersey, Los Angeles, Manhattan and so on. I would at least follow what the masses were talking about.

Editor (Marathi): Don't worry, I will translate the choice Marathi words and phrases used in the campaign. *(Turning to the Editor, Hindi)* But he is the lucky bloke, the only one who can really understand and appreciate the flowery language and couplets of Atalji. My Hindi is of the Bombay variety.

Editor (English): And mine is of no variety. I had listened to Vajpayee being interviewed on TV. Was that Hindi he spoke? It sounded so different.

Editor (Hindi): Don't worry, I will help you with the translating. But we should stick together. I have found that the Editors (English) receive more invitations to parties, dinners, Rotary Club meetings and so on.

Editor (English): Don't worry, I will take you with me. But I hope you don't make noises while consuming soup. That noise puts me off.

Editor (Marathi): We are lucky because no one is going to serve us soups at Jalgaon or Beed.

Editor (English): A daily 'exclusive' interview with Atalji. Is that possible?

Editor (Marathi): You leave that to me. I have been in this business for long. Interviews are no problem.

Editor (Hindi): You get the interviews, I will embellish them with typical Vajpayee words and phrases.

Editor (English): And I will look around for the dry cleaners. My clothes are a mess. Gee, I never had such problems at the United Nations. •

BOOK OF THE WEEK

The poet as raconteur

Jayanta Mahapatra's collection of short stories exudes a rare poetic charm

When a poet consciously chooses to be a raconteur, his tales invariably tend to exude poetry. Jayanta Mahapatra's *The Green Gardener and Other Stories* is a refreshing assortment of 18 incredibly poetic short stories.

The narration itself breathes poetry and the reader has to tread perpetually on the fragile and slithery borderline between poetry and prose. Though, admittedly, not without unease and seldom at the cost of the fable.

In spite of the ambivalent voice of the narrator suffused with fluid poetic overtones, the reader can hardly miss the meandering yet sturdy thread of the storyline that makes it an absolutely dentless whole, a densely woven matrix without any rambling ends.

Each story suavely ferries you across sensitive and turbulent waves of human emotions with the waft and aroma of poetry till you anchor on the crowning moments which, as the story-teller deftly unravels, are either 'closed ends' or the more complex 'open-ended' endings generating 'beginnings' in the 'end'. At times, the climax may even spring jolting surprises on you. There are startling lurches and stunning peripateia which not only baffle the reader but induce a natural retrogade reading as well.

It is a myriad-coloured sheaf. The stories are as varied as the indigenous cultures of the massive Indian sub-continet and as tiny and round as droplets of dew. Some of them sparkle, some simply excite and some impress you. Readable at a single sitting, most of the stories have unity of impression and move in an even line from its exposition to the end.

Obviously, Mahapatra loves to tell tales with an all-pervasive 'I' and even when he does not and chooses to adopt the omniscient narrative mode, the incurable 'I' hovers over it all. Obliquely or tangentially, he himself remains the centre of consciousness all through. Though poetry wells up within his acutely subjective world, the story-teller knows how to hold the children from play and old men from chimney corners. Take the story called *The Disappearance of Protima Jena*, for instance. The author chooses to narrate the story through the first-person point of view. The adolescent psyche delicately crystallises the enigma that wrapped Protima, the focal character in the story. "Protima Jena attracted gossip, a great deal of it. Why, one could never tell . . But I am talking of a happening during my boyhood, at a time when I began to feel alone

Jayanta Mahapatra: (centre): he treads on the slithery borderline between poetry and prose

The stories are as varied as the indigenous cultures of the massive Indian sub-continet and as tiny and round as droplets of dew. Some of them sparkle, some simply excite and some impress you

and a vague sense of loss somewhere inside me seemed to embrace the melancholic valley of the Mahanadi, that was my home." In spite of the staple of a thriller, it is not a run-of-the-mill mystery story. The riddle of the disappearance remains shrouded in mystery till the end while the boy grows up shedding off his mesmerised infatuation with the inscrutable woman. The story ends on a note of sour disillusionment.

As poetry is Mahapatra's forte, poetic nuances and palpable images and visuals can often metamorphose a fairly trite scene into an unforgettable moment. *In a Lost Love's Turning*, a story which concludes with a line jerk, or *Eyes*, or the story titled *The Hotel* — which reads more like a self-absorbed lingering monologue — are replete with such poetic interludes. For instance, "Life was a touch, a knock at the door, the parting rain in September before the cold winds began to blow in from the Himalayas ... Mad clouds shifted in the air, caught the sun's gold and vermillion and defied age and time. Mala was a warm, blue sea. Drunken, I whooshed my crisp, white gulls of youth into the sky, saw them glide and wheel, and swiftly disappear in their wild ascensions."

There are also stories with a flavour of their own, stories which hinge on a singular situation. *Ringing Silences* is one such interesting story where an anonymous telephone call leads to a steady tapering of love between an otherwise happy couple. In *The Bottle of Perfume*, a serious theme of the wife discovering her husband's infidelity is subtly laced with comic undertones.

Paradoxically enough, all his stories are marked by austere economy on the one hand and fine excess on the other. Though the teller's forays into poetry are not few and far between, the maker remains a stickler for restraint. To my mind, the author is not a mere story-teller but a dextrous story-maker as well. •

Surabhi Banerjee

Surabhi Banerjee is a distinguished academic and the author of Jyoti Basu: an Authorised Biography

The Green Gardener and Other Stories *by Jayanta Mahapatra. Published by Orient Longman. Price: Rs 70*

EXCERPT

She looked around the bare place which was her home and observed the weak straw roof give way to the water at two points. Every year the new straw was woven into the roof in early June, the weak and lifeless strands thrown away. But this year they didn't have enough to pay their meagre rent

SHORT TAKES

All that kitsch

It's not clear why on earth did the author choose to write this book. It defies all logic and sense. In its endeavour to be 'classy', it has ended up as completely crass. Ostensibly, it talks the language of the "young, fresh kids round the block", for whom having an attitude is tantamount to lacing their vocabulary with foul four-letter words.

The novel (if one may call it so), is a collection of 13 stories with an autobiographical touch. The narrator is a young Indian man in search of his roots and his quest takes the reader to several locales like Bombay, New York, Paris and Hong Kong among others.

A more apt title for the book would be *Of No Fixed Focus.*

Of No Fixed Address *by Kaizad Gustad. Published by Harper Collins. Price: Rs 195*

Trouble In Paradise

Another book on Kashmir, but this time it is fiction. But the fable is perhaps very near to the reality of Kashmiri life and politics.

The book narrates graphically what happens when an ordinary person is dragged into the cesspool of politics, thanks to the high-handedness of those in power. The protagonist is Sayid Ahmed, who is pushed deeper and deeper into the abyss. Which brings him closer to the miseries of the common people. And this misery, he realises, is largely the result of the repeated blunders committed by the Central Government.

In this context, the author assesses the past, present and the future of this state. He also offers a solution for lasting peace.

To find out what that is, read this gripping story.

Torn Apart *by Romen Basu. Published by Faces Books*

Small mercies

Good things come small. So says the author of this collection of short stories. He feels that it is more important to attain the small things of daily life to which we normally do not attach much significance.

The author also pans the strides made in the field of science and development. For all the benefits of science, it has bred more hatred and misunderstanding among people than any other. In this age of hi-tech, people hear but do not listen and see but do not feel.

What is the purpose of a lie? What does good life mean? Why does a good man suffer while a bad one wallows in enjoyment? If these are the questions you are seeking answers to, then this is a book for you.

Eyes In The Sky and Other Stories *by Shambhunath Verma. Published by Konark. Price: Rs 200.*

Broadening vision

The AIFF pays heed to public demand for live telecast of soccer matches

The All India Football Federation has, for once, taken a firm stand. It has entered into an agreement with Doordarshan to broadcast the national football league as well as other competitions like the national championships, the Federation Cup and the Rajiv Gandhi youth tournament.

The national league was made possible by Leisure Sports Management's tie-up with the International Management Group and the induction of sponsors like Philips. STAR TV came up with a hefty sum to take exclusive telecasting rights. Other sponsors pitched in with more funds to make this all-India tournament a truly prestigious and lucrative competition for the leading clubs of the country.

The inaugural year's championship was a far greater success than even the AIFF had imagined. But there was one flaw: there was no live coverage on television. To begin with, STAR TV's reach in India was limited. What made things worse was the fact that no one got to see the match as it was being played. While some fans did watch the delayed telecasts, their number was never great.

The disappointment of the fans, however, did not match that of the sponsors. One of the principal conditions laid down by the sponsors was live coverage of at least 15-16 matches. This did not take place last year, despite repeated reminders by the AIFF. Naturally, Philips and the other companies involved were disappointed, to say the least.

This year again, the tale was being repeated. The league began with a bang in Delhi, but only for those at the Ambedkar Stadium. Again, there was no television coverage. STAR TV had apparently planned a programme of live telecasts from January but nothing came of it. In fact, even the long stint planned by the programmers in Goa came to nought with the news that the AIFF had decided to rescind its contract with STAR.

Although a formal agreement with Doordarshan has not yet been signed, it is understood that DD will earn telecast rights for a substantial number of games

For the general viewer, there was all-round disappointment. After almost a decade, football had started gaining in popularity because of the national league. Last year, interest was sustained by the sheer novelty of a league stretching over 2,000 miles and involving eight teams with a liberal sprinkling of foreign players.

This year, disappointment turned to resentment as the competition just couldn't be viewed on TV. More than the spectators, the sponsors didn't want to lose out on valuable mileage for the second year running. A clash of interests was inevitable.

Several rounds of talks were held but STAR TV just didn't get the necessary permission from the authorities to uplink matches as they were being played. As this was an important clause in the agreement, the AIFF demanded compliance. When it was not forthcoming, the apex body decided to sever connections.

Although a formal agreement with Doordarshan has not yet been signed, it is understood that DD will earn telecast rights for a substantial number of games. For viewers, it seems strange that DD has had no problems with simultaneous telecast of cricket matches, but with football, the hitch started at the very beginning.

One explanation is that DD's relationship with WorldTel has always been smooth, whereas it has been uneasy at best with TWI, the producers of soccer programmes for STAR. Now that the arrangement with STAR is uncertain, one wonders what DD will choose to do.

STAR TV, of course, has not given up. It has demanded a compensation of US$ 1.3 million from the AIFF, while simultaneously claiming the right to telecast select matches of the national league. It has cited loss of jobs — which is questionable because most of the people involved are Indians working elsewhere — and quality of telecasts. The latter is also questionable because DD's coverage cannot be faulted. It is the transmission quality that is suspect.

Anyway, the last has not been heard on the subject yet. •

Arijit Sen/Calcutta

GAUTAM RAJADHYAKSHA

If Sridevi really and truly intends to give up on the movies in a few months' time — as she has announced to all her producers — then why is she bothering to lose all that weight? After all, you don't need to have the proportions of a *Vogue* model (well okay, so we're talking Cindy Crawford rather than Kate moss) to look after a daughter and a husband, do you?

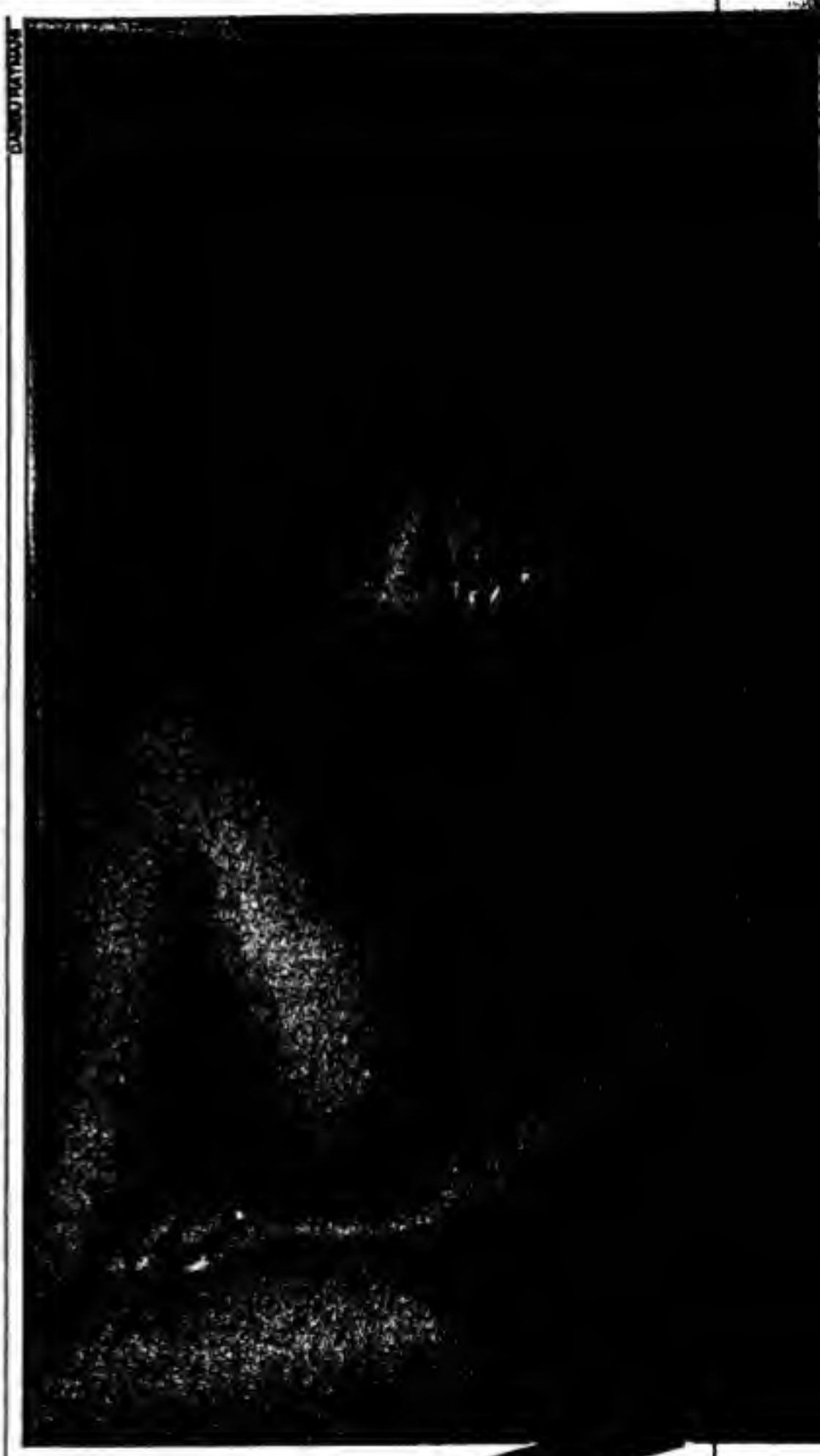
Or is this Sri's way of making sure that Boney doesn't stray from his (second) home and hearth? Pity, Mona the first Mrs Boney Kapoor didn't have the same idea.

Those who had it that the Zeenat Aman-Mazhar Khan marriage was all but over, had clearly underestimated the lady's devotion and loyalty. No sooner was Mazhar admitted to hospital than was she ensconced by his bedside, playing the ever-dutiful wife.

So is the toy boy — whatever his name was — an infatuation of the past? Watch this space.

So, Pooja Bhatt's off the hook on this one. The gorgeous model-turned-actor Marc Robinson swears that Pooja had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that his marriage to Colleen Khan has broken up after six-odd years.

According to him, he and Bhatt are just great pals and like hanging out together. And in any case, he's still recovering from the traumatic break-up of his marriage and is not ready to enter into another relationship just yet — with Pooja or anyone else, for that matter.



Sangeeta Bijlani did the most sensible thing ever when she walked out on Salman Khan, to walk off into the sunset with Mohammad Azharuddin.

Thus today, while Bijli is a proud mother-to-be and Azza has been reinstated as India's Test captain, Salman has yet to settle down in cosy matrimony with Somy Ali (the subject of many rows between Salman and Sangeeta, and the reason for their break-up).

In fact, it's much worse, really. Forget about making an honest woman of Somy, Khan is already letting his eye rove beyond her. And it's beginning to look as if model Shweta Menon is all set to do to Somy what she did to Sangeeta.

Well, as they say, what goes around comes around. •

B.R. CHOPRA

"Rising real estate values are but a small part of the problem. Acute funds crunch in the film industry is another factor"

Nearly 25 of Bombay's film studios have shut down. More are on their way out

RANJIT STUDIO, Dadar: *has been rented out to a garment factory*

PACK-UP

Bichade sabhi bari bari ... (Off they all went one by one). This soulfull number from Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* moved many who loved its haunting tune and sentimental yearning for things that pass away. That was the decade of the Fifties. Hindi films had reached an all-time high. The involvement of talented actors and directors showed in what they produced. And the audience simply loved it.

More than 40 years later, that song from *Pyaasa* is a sad reminder of the way things once were in Bollywood's dream factories—its film studios. Mammoth sets have been reduced to rubble, cranes carrying cameras have disappeared, scenes once flushed with light are a cobweb-infested area of darkness. Nearly 25 studios of the country's premier film industry have either been demolished or shut down in the last three decades. And more are on their way out.

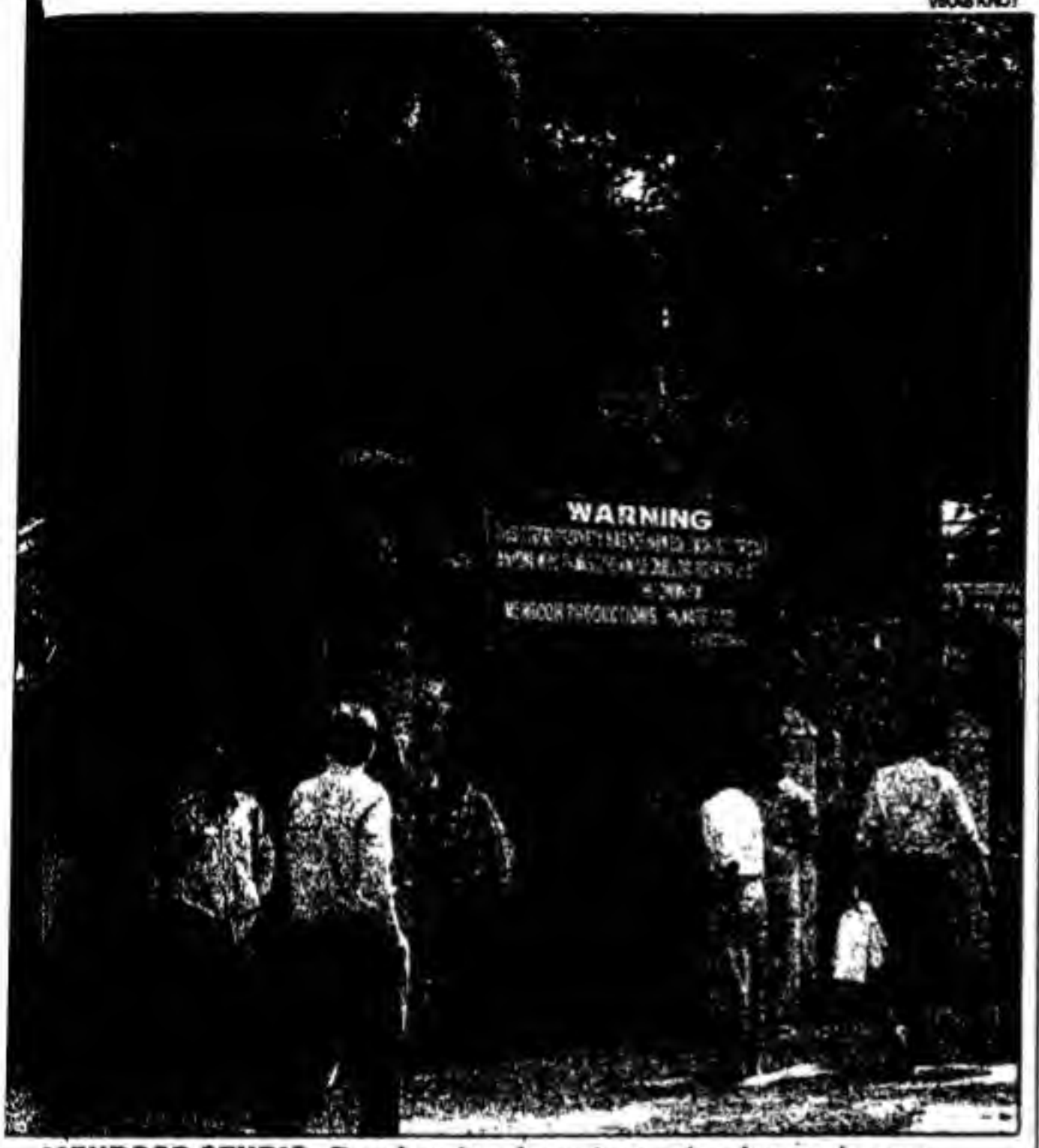
Bombay Talkies, Kohinoor Studio, Wadia Movie Tone, Roop Tara Studio, Chandu Studio, Vishu Movie Tone ... the list goes on. The latest to join the brigade is Natraj Studio at Andheri. One of its largest stages was axed down recently to make way for a more viable commercial establishment. This was the very same where memorable movies like Shakti Samanta's *Aradhana* and *Anuraag*, F.C. Mehra's *Professor*, Ramanand Sagar's *Geet* and *Charas* etc. were picturised.

Next in line, claim Bollywood's industrious rumour mills, is Mehboob Studio at Bandra. This was established by legendary film director Mehboob Khan of *Mother India*-fame. The studio has been incurring heavy financial losses over the years.

Famous Studio at Mahalakshmi, which was known for being "overbooked" all the time, is now a poor shadow of itself. Barely four to five shoots take place every week. In fact, only five of its total eight shooting floors are utilised nowadays.

"Studios have not been doing cent per cent business in the last few years," commented film director Ashim Samanta. "In fact, running a studio is no longer a profitable proposition." Ashim's father and noted director Shakti Samanta is

VIKAS KHOT



MEHBOOB STUDIO, Bandra: *has been incurring heavy losses*

TIME

one of the co-owners of the partially-demolished Natraj Studio .

A host of factors have been playing villain in the 'demolition' drama. Spiralling real estate values in the metropolis, for one.

"Most of our studios have lost their battle against rising real estate prices in the metropolis over the last three decades," concedes actor-director Randhir Kapoor. "Studios with their spacious premises fall an easy prey to real-estate hunters," he says.

For example, Ranjit Studio at Dadar has been rented out to a garment factory. Industrial units have sprung up where Asha Studio was once located in Chembur. An air-conditioned market has been constructed on the site of Central Studio. MNT Studio at Andheri has been turned into the offices of German Remedies, a multinational pharmaceutical company.

The fact that studio owners did not need much persuasion to sell off the premises, saddens Kapoor. "For them, it is purely a business venture. While for us, film-makers, it is a place of work and worship. Hence, we tend to maintain our studios even when they are no longer financially viable." He was referring to the famous R K Studios, where the late master showman Raj Kapoor shot all his films — the mega-ventures which were lapped up by the audience in India and abroad.

Kiran Shantaram, son of legendary actor-director V. Shantaram, could not agree more. He now looks after his late father's legacy, Rajkamal Kalamandir. "We went through an extremely lean phase between 1984 to 1993. Maintaining a studio was a losing deal then. But the thought of selling this place, where my father spent his entire lifetime making films, never entered my head," he said. Truely, the place overflows with nostalgia. All of V. Shantaram's movies, including *Do Aankhen Barah Haath, Navrang, Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje*, were extensively shot at Rajkamal Kalamandir in Dadar.

RANDHIR KAPOOR

"For us film-makers it's a place of work and worship. We tend to maintain our studios when they are no longer financially viable"

However, as veteran film-maker B.R. Chopra insists, rising real estate values are but "a small part of the real problem facing the studios". He blames it on an "acute funds crunch in the film industry, deteriorating quality of cinema and excessive entertainment tax".

"Bollywood was bursting with studios in 1948. In fact, there were five of them in Andheri itself," recalls Chopra, reminiscing about the days when he had just joined the world of films. "Now, there are barely nine to ten functioning studios. It is really unfortunate that our film industry has lost so many of them in the past and is on its way to losing some more," he said, voice tinged with sadness.

Besides, the growing trend among Bollywood producers to shoot in exotic locales rather than in the confines of a film studio has also left a lot of studios without work.

"Shooting in the metropolis is an

THE LOST WORLD

Well-known studios of the past

BOMBAY TALKIES: Established by director Himanshu Rai in the early Thirties in Malad, the studio rose to become an institution until it was eventually demolished in the Fifties.

KARDAR STUDIO: This studio in Parel was founded by director A.D. Kardar and extensively used by B.R. Chopra between 1955 to 1975.

ASIF STUDIO: Founded by director K. Asif in Andhéri, this was where the unforgettable *Mughal-E-Azam* was shot.

PRAKASH STUDIO: One of the first few studios of Bollywood, Prakash Studio saw the making of over a hundred movies including *Ramraaj*, the only film Mahatma Gandhi ever saw.

MOHAN STUDIOS: Some of Bimal Roy's best works including *Do Bigha Zameen, Sujata* and *Bandini* were picturised in this studio, located in Andheri.

SHREE SOUND STUDIO/RANJIT STUDIO/ROOP TARA STUDIO: Over 150 films under the banner of Ranjit Movie Tone were made at these studios, all situated in Dadar. Legend has it that the owner lured K.L. Saigal and Prithviraaj Kapoor from Calcutta to Mumbai, by paying them Rs 1 lakh each. Later, he had to sell off his studios after he lost money in gambling.

expensive and tedious affair. Rather than shoot in the confines of a studio, most film producers prefer to do it elsewhere within a specified time frame," reasoned Rauf Ahmed, editor of *Screen*. "This way, they manage to procure bulk dates from the artistes (to complete the film faster) and also their complete dedication (by preventing them from wandering from set to set)." In fact, Seychelles, the tiny island on the East African coast, offers a host of incentives to Bollywood producers, making it a much sought-after place for film and video shoots.

next three months." "On an average, we have 20-25 shoots a day, mostly teleserials," informed joint managing director of Film City. The major serials that are now showing on TV — B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat-II*, Ramesh Sippy's *Gaatha*, Raj Babbar's *Mein Dilli Hoon*, Plus Channel's magnum opus *Swabhimaan* — are being shot here, making it the busiest studio in Mumbai. In fact, an additional shooting floor was recently constructed to meet the growing demand.

But Murarilal Seksaria, manager of Filmistaan Studio at Goregaon, is not all

FAMOUS STUDIO, Mahalakshmi: *only five of its eight shooting floors are being used*

Bungalows too, have emerged as a viable alternative to studios. Large, spacious houses, especially in Juhu-Ville Parle area, are heavily booked for several months. As director N. Chandra of *Tezaab*-fame explained, "Shooting in a bungalow is comparatively simpler and cost-effective. No more tension of constructing a set, as in studios, which is a time-consuming and expensive exercise. You needn't get ulcers if your stars fail to turn up for the shoot."

But it's not as if all studio-owners are faced with grim prospects. Thanks to the boom in television, myriad sitcoms and advertising films are being made. And once again, some of the studios have become a scene of hectic activity. Gushed Shantaram, "Business has never been better. Our studio is heavily booked for

that ecstatic with the development. "With films not faring well in the last few years, ad films and video shoots dominated our booking schedules," he explains. "This year, however, due to depressed economy and reduced ad budgets, we have had lesser ad film shoots. And video shoots too, have reduced substantially after Gulshan Kumar's murder. Earlier, we would have four to five shoots daily but after the music baron's death, it has reduced to barely one shoot a day," he said.

So, will the cradle of Bombay's best-known money-spinning industry die a "premature death", as Chopra suggests? Or is there still hope for Bollywood's dream factories which can actually dream of a better future? •

Kaajal Walia/Bombay

JAMMU & KASHMIR

Tug-of-war

While separatists are determined to disrupt the poll process, the government is desperate to reach out to a disillusioned electorate

On 8 January, even as chief secretary Ashok Jaitley was hosting a high-level meeting in winter capital Jammu to preview security arrangements for the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls, summer capital Srinagar was rocked by two bomb blasts.

An explosive device set off at the busy commercial centre of Qamarwari left six persons wounded, three of them critically. At around the same time, a Border Security Force (BSF) party was made the target of a grenade attack in the high-security Jahangir Chowk. One civilian was killed in the blast, while another was injured. The Al Fatch Force, which hardly has a presence in the capital city, claimed responsibility for the attack at Jahangir Chowk.

From 1 January, when the Election Commission (EC) announced the schedule for the 12th Lok Sabha elections, the Valley has been bracing itself for "yet another showdown between government and separatist forces". And following the attacks in two prime spots of the city's main civil lines area, the fear of "escalating violence" in the run-up to the polls has gripped Srinagar.

Jammu and Kashmir will witness the battle of the ballot for six seats, in three phases, on 16 and 28 February, and 7 March. And the battle lines are clearly drawn: the government agencies will do their best to ensure the full participation of the people in the polls, while the separatist forces will use every possible means to disrupt the poll process and reduce it to a "farce".

The All Party Huriyat Conference (APHC) has already called for a boycott of the elections. The multi-party separatist combine has urged the people not to associate themselves with the government-sponsored poll exercise. According to the APHC, elections provide no solution to the Kashmir pro-

CROSSFIRE: *securitymen take on militants in Srinagar*

SAY NO TO POLLS: *file picture of an APHC demonstration*

blem. "Elections, held in the past, have failed to throw up any solution to the Kashmir tangle," read a Huriyat statement on 7 January, emphasising that the issue be "addressed in core". Granting Kashmiri people the "acknowledged right of self-determination" is what the APHC has been demanding.

The Huriyat leaders have announced a statewide campaign to mobilise public support against the poll process. The APHC's anti-poll campaign was kicked off at a public rally at Takia Magam in south Kashmir on 4 January. A host of senior leaders, led by Mohammad Yaseen Malik, were present at the rally. Two days later, the Huriyat leaders assembled at Tral, where the 600-year-old shrine of Mir Syed Ali Hamandani, the first preacher of Islam in the Kashmir valley, had been gutted under mysterious circumstances. The APHC meetings are said to have drawn huge crowds and boosted the combine's efforts to reach out to the people.

Meanwhile, the ruling National Conference, the Congress, the Janata Dal and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are busy working out their pre-poll strategies to counter the APHC's challenge and motivate the people to participate in the elections. While the Congress and the BJP are ready to play up the "failures" of the Farooq Abdullah government, the ruling National Conference is struggling to find its selling points.

Chief minister Abdullah had appointed a Committee on Autonomy headed by former Union minister and Sadre Riyasat Dr Karan Singh with a promise of reverting J&K to its pre-1953 constitutional position within six months. But Karan Singh has resigned from the committee and the report is yet to be submitted.

The National Conference has little to show on other fronts as well. Peace remains an elusive dream for the people of the state. The shadow of the gun continues to loom large over the Valley. Killings and blasts have occurred with alarming regularity during the National Conference's 15-month rule. Allegations of corruption in the government ranks are growing every day and developmental programmes have failed to take off.

AT A LOSS: *CM Farooq Abdullah (right) with army personnel*

For the moment, the ruling party is busy formulating plans to woo a disillusioned electorate back to the polling booths. In the previous parliamentary and Assembly elections, security forces had been accused of herding people to the booths. History might well repeat itself, but not without stiff opposition from the separatists.

And caught in the tug-of-war between the government agencies and the separatist forces, yet again, are the people of Jammu and Kashmir. •

Rashid Ahmad/Srinagar

School of thought

A unique experiment may revolutionise the system of education in West Bengal

It's a unique experiment in school education. About 20 schools at Bijpur, 46 km north of Calcutta, have set up a 'school complex'. And the teachers claim the experiment will revolutionise school-level education in West Bengal.

Under the new system, students of all classes will have a common syllabus, a common question-bank with a common examination pattern. The idea was first discussed at a workshop in 1989. Organised by the State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT) and the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education (WBBSE), the workshop concluded that a new method should be introduced in place of the prevailing system. But the members of the All Bengal Teachers' Association (ABTA) expressed their reservation and stalled such a move.

Now, after a lapse of several years, the ABTA is finally convinced that the system will be a great help to the students and will correct much of what is wrong with the current system.

The 'school complex' will address several important aspects of school education — formulating syllabi, forming a common question-bank, removing the chances of question leaks and curbing the growth of mushrooming coaching centres.

"Good students do not face the hurdle of admission and they get admitted quite easily. Such students are very few," said a teacher working on the new system. The 'school complex', therefore, aims to take special care of the weaker students and help them cope with admission problems.

Before the onset of each academic year, the teachers of these schools organise a seminar and after lengthy discussions formulate the syllabi. Copies of the syllabi are sent to member schools around the first week of May. A question bank committee comprising teachers from the participating schools has been set up. Before the final examination, the committee members meet to discuss and finalise the questions. Each subject is assigned to a group of four-to-five teachers and two-or-three sets of question papers for each subject are prepared before the final papers are decided on. "This will remove one evil plaguing our education system — leak of question papers," claims one member-teacher of the question bank committee.

WEST BENGAL

Death trap

A four-year-old boy falls into an open manhole in Calcutta, causing a public outcry and fuelling a political controversy

Calcutta. The city of joy. The city of compassion. The city where strangers are made to feel at home. The city where the body of a four-year-old is fished out from a cesspool 40 hours after he falls into an open manhole on a busy thoroughfare.

It was the evening of 7 January. Bharati Pal and her four-year-old-son, Kaushik, were returning home to Kankurgachi after visiting her father in Barasat. Around 6:30 pm, mother and son were trying to negotiate the chaotic Ultadanga crossing. In the office-hour rush, Bharati lost her grip on Kaushik's hand for a minute.

"The next moment, I turned to find that Deep (Kaushik) wasn't there. He had just vanished. Then, spotting the open manhole behind me, I knew in a flash what had happened to my son...."said Bharati Pal.

The young woman cried out for help, and then fainted out of shock. Passersby and locals rushed to the spot. But there was no sign of the child. An SOS was sent to the Calcutta Municipal Corporation (CMC), the police and the fire brigade.

It took quite a while to form a rag-tag rescue team. A few amateur 'divers' from some nearby 'clubs' and a few fire-brigade personnel entered the manhole and searched in vain for Kaushik.

DESHAKALYAN CHOWDHURY

BLACK HOLE: *the killer manhole in Ultadanga, Calcutta*

A day-long operation was conducted on 8 January under the supervision of Raghebandra Das, deputy chief engineer of the CMC. A team of divers scoured an area of 1,050 sq.m. in the sewerage channel near the site of the accident. But to no avail.

On the morning of 9 January, one of the channel gates was opened to allow excess water from the Ultadanga pumping station to flow. As the water level rose, so did Kaushik's bloated body.

"What was my boy's fault that he had to leave us like this? Please cut off my right hand, I lost my son because of it," sobs Bharati Pal.

Her husband, Dulal, a vegetable vendor at the VIP market, Ultadanga, is angry: "What do you say about these leaders? If they cannot ensure the safety of a child on the roads, how can they take the responsibility of managing a city, a state?"

This incident has, indeed, brought the ruling Left Front's apathy into sharp focus and sparked off reactions ranging from anger to concern. Realising the mood of the city, CMC commissioner Asim Barman and municipal affairs minister

CLASS APART: *schoolchildren in West Bengal*

The new system would pose a "threat to the tuition racket", observed one teacher of the school complex. It will also be a great help to financially weaker schools who can't always afford the expenses of printing the question papers.

The main objective of this new system, says an ABTA member, is to bring all the schools under one dispensation.

Pankaj Adhikari/Calcutta

SAFETY LAST: *municipal affairs minister Ashoke Bhattacharya (left) and mayor Prasanta Chatterjee*

Ashoke Bhattacharya were quick to apologise to the people of Calcutta. "We cannot avert responsibility for what happened. We will identify and punish the guilty," asserted Barman. "We apologise to the people for the tragedy," said Ashoke Bhattacharya.

Mere apologies will not be enough. A comprehensive action-plan and a committed programme are a must if Calcuttans are to be saved from thousands of such killer manholes. The 'manhole business' is a lucrative one in Calcutta. The steel covers are regularly stolen and sold as scrap in the market. And it takes months, if not years, for the authorities to replace a missing manhole cover.

But the authorities will have to be backed by the people. For if there is one thing that Calcuttans lack, it is 'road sense.' Ironically, the Ultadanga accident occurred bang in the middle of a much-hyped 'Road Safety Week' being conducted on the streets of the West Bengal capital.

The manhole tragedy also comes at a time when Calcutta is busy preparing for the polls. And it has presented the Opposition with an opportunity to embarrass the ruling Reds. Not surprisingly, Mamata Banerjee was the first to take up the cause. The Mamata-led Trinamool Congress (TMC) observed a 'protest day' on 10 January.

And that's just the beginning as the TMC has decided to make this an important poll issue. "The people must know what kind of people their rulers are. They simply do not care. And they have no shame," thundered Mamata.

With Kaushik's death striking a chord among Calcuttans, the CPI(M) will have a lot of explaining to do. Directly in the line of public ire is mayor Prasanta Chatterjee. The accident took place in his ward — no. 32 in Ultadanga — and Chatterjee was hard-pressed to play down the state of neglect. Incidentally, Prasanta Chatterjee is the CPI(M)'s candidate for the north-east Calcutta Lok Sabha seat.

The CPI(M) leadership has already decided to tackle the problem on a war-footing. "At a high-level meeting involving the mayor, the CMC commissioner, the police commissioner and CMDA officials, it was decided that all open manholes will be identified and plugged at the earliest. Surveillance at trouble spots will be intensified. An integrated sewerage map will also be drawn up," revealed Ashoke Bhattacharya.

All that is fine. But it is of no use to Bharati and Dulal Pal. •

Soumen Datta/Calcutta with Iva Guha/Siliguri

WEST BENGAL

Turbulence

Hectic politicking is on in the hills of north Bengal

Despite the cold wave sweeping the hills of north Bengal, the political temperature here has suddenly shot up. Leaders of various political parties have swung into action and hectic pre-poll parleys are on.

Darjeeling is, of course, the political epicentre and Subash Ghisingh the man of the moment. Come elections, and the importance of being Ghisingh becomes clear. With the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) supremo still reigning supreme in Darjeeling, leaders of every political hue — CPI(M), Congress, BJP and the newly-formed Trinamool Congress (TMC) — are making a beeline for his Darjeeling abode.

Ashoke Bhattacharya, minister of municipal affairs, was quick to solicit the GNLF chief's support for the CPI(M) can-

CENTRE OF ATTENTION: *GNLF supremo Subash Ghisingh*

didate from Darjeeling, Ananda Pathak. Mamata Banerjee's TMC, too, is desperate to woo Ghisingh. Mani Shankar Aiyar, national coordinator of the TMC, dropped by to renew old ties (dating back to the turbulent Eighties) with Subash Ghisingh. Aiyar is said to be eyeing the Darjeeling Lok Sabha constituency, provided he has the full-fledged support of Ghisingh. Sudip Bandyopadhyay, Mamata's right-hand man, met the GNLF boss recently and tried to convince him to join the 'Bangla Bachao Front'. But the mission failed as Ghisingh is giving priority to his struggle for the separate state of Gorkhaland.

From the Congress, it is former Union home minister Buta Singh who keeps in regular touch with Ghisingh. Not to be left out, the state BJP leaders have joined the never-ending line of politicos flocking to the GNLF supremo.

Subash Ghisingh, of course, is playing his cards very close to his chest. He is meeting every political leader that comes

POLITICAL HEAVYWEIGHTS: *Kamal Guha (right) and A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chowdhury*

along but is in no mood to make any commitments. The GNLF leader is playing his old game of keeping everyone guessing till the last moment and there is no telling what his poll plans are.

Apart from Subash Ghisingh, the most sought-after politico in north Bengal is Kamal Guha. After the former state minister and Forward Bloc (Socialist) general secretary broke away from the Left Front, the CPI(M) leadership was very wary of Guha.

But now, with the poll bell tolling, state home (police) minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee took the initiative, opened a hot line to Guha, and tried to persuade him to return to the Left Front fold. Guha agreed to do so provided 'his' candidate would be fielded from the vital Cooch Behar seat and backed by the CPI(M) and the Left Front as a whole. With the ruling Left in no position to accede to Guha's demands, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was forced to back-track.

Then came the TMC. Sobhandeb Chattopadhyay, a close aide of Mamata, held a closed-door meeting with Kamal Guha and asked him to participate in the 'Bangla Bachao Front'. But the talks fell through with Guha insisting that he would have nothing to do with the TMC if Mamata entered into any sort of electoral alliance or adjustment with the BJP, the GNLF, or the Kamtapuris of north Bengal.

Finally, it was the turn of the Congress. PCC general secretary Gobinda Naskar, Somen Mitra's emissary, met Kamal Guha at Dinhata in Cooch Behar. Guha agreed to ally with the Congress, after Naskar informed him that his party was ready to sacrifice the Cooch Behar seat and back Gobinda Roy of the Forward Bloc(S).

A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chowdhury is another political heavyweight much in demand in north Bengal. With the Malda strongman, reportedly, leaning towards Mamata, Somen Mitra made a desperate dash for Chowdhury's constituency. Ghani Khan agreed to the state Congress chief's plea to stand from Malda, but not before extracting his pound of flesh: brother Abu Hasem Khan's candidature from Jangipur, and close associate Sabitri Mitra's from Raiganj.

Meanwhile, there is trouble in the CPI(M) Darjeeling district committee over Ananda Pathak's candidature from the crucial Darjeeling seat. Pathak's nomination has angered prominent DYFI leader and former Kurseong MLA Tulsi Bhattarai. There is even talk of Bhattarai and his supporters engineering another split in the CPI(M). •

Iva Guha/Darjeeling

TELEVISION — SHUBHRA GUPTA

Move 'n shake

Shekhar Suman tries to do a Jay Leno

Jay Leno isn't the only one who can do it, weeknights. Beginning last week, he's got competition, in the shape of Shekhar Suman.

Sony's *Movers and Shakers* (Wednesdays, 10 pm) has a near-duplicate routine: there's a band to one side (it's not a patch on the one Leno has, but it's trying, especially the lead vocalist who introduces the guests), Shekhar in the middle, and the guests on the other.

Ruby Bhatia was the first one on, and she continued with the naughty analogy: she grinned, winked an eye, and said: 'Late night with Shekhar Suman, anything can happen'. Ho, ho, ho, went the host, obligingly.

It is only the first episode so it wouldn't be fair to pass judgement. But aren't there any real celebrities left in the land? Or have they all been snaffled by Simi Garewal? She's gone on record to say that there are only 25 celebs in the country: all the ones which appear on her show, naturally.

Apart from Ms Bhatia, who said the usual things about matrimony, acting (ooh, Hindi films, *cheee*) and veejaying, there was ex-cricketer, present-

CELEB SHOW: *Shekhar Suman*

TV-star-in-the-making, Salil Ankola. So it was a case of TV celeb talking to TV celeb, talking to wannabe TV celeb. Not scintillating enough. Certainly not naughty enough.

It isn't as if Shekhar Suman can't do stand-up routines with the best of them, but he has to have the right back up. Some of his jokes were spot on, others fell flat: we'll just have to see how he goes on.

Another old hand turned up last week, on Zee. Pankaj Kapoor, who has been masquerading as a funny Sardar on *Colgate Top Ten* with a fair amount of droll success, turns detective again. *Mahandas B.A.LLB.* (Mondays, 9:30 pm) is middle-aged, unlike the spiffy Karamchand, and doesn't chew carrots, also unlike Karamchand. But he has the same beady-eyed attitude towards crime and its perpetrators, and this time he has five specialists to help him detect.

No Kitty, alas. Instead of Sushmita Mukherjee, we have Supriya Pathak. And because nothing very much happened in the first episode, we'll have to do some sleuthing of our own to tell you how the genius makes out. •

SUNDAY WEEK

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 18 JANUARY, 1998

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

Be grateful to those who are concerned about your basics. You'll be feeling good. A sponsor can make a generous offer. Idealism proves to be a fundamental thing in your daily routine. You are delighted at the response you get to an appeal. A secret love affair can make you think of future plans

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

Half-measures are out. You will feel confident that what you do is right, timely and that an advantage must accrue. Material things may be the main target. But there'll also be a lot of inner satisfaction if you can prove that you can take care of your own affairs. Nothing should stand in your way.

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

Personal interests may be hampered because of cash flow problems. You must seriously consider how your priorities are to be agreed upon. You can be reassured by a friend who wishes to remain anonymous or at least stay in the background. This will probably make you feel a lot more cheerful.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

Deal with personal finances carefully: don't part with hard-earned money too easily. You may be presumptuous, but that is something you cannot afford to do. Be honest in your dealings, whether for business or pleasure, and you can't go too wrong.

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

An eventful week. You may want to go the whole hog. An initiative seems likely and that will be no mean effort. Cooperate with a person who handles money or is your principal financial adviser. Your main problem could be understanding others' needs, but you have to be self-sufficient.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

Show your feelings to the one who matters. Some heavy reading is possible, which can be extremely interesting. You may be thinking in terms of self-development or looking for other options in your workfield as you have time on hand.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

Confidence continues to grow. Those in authority will be glad to be part of your plans. A marriage may be in the last stages of preparation and a select group of friends can enjoy the celebrations. You feel very strongly about something private and personal; you do not wish to talk about it.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

Look after your own position but be willing to adapt to changes. Domestic arrangements can be tailored at the last-minute to accommodate your plans. Be at your best in the company of important people. An engagement can be arranged with a bit of luck.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

Be generous. Don't just talk about your good intentions; do something to demonstrate your feelings. Artistic talents are appreciated, whether you're a viewer or an exhibitor. A place you visit can delight you immensely. There can be talk of an engagement or a marriage. Children will be a pleasure.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

Plans made earlier can be put to good use. Keep a cool head and see to it that things get off to a smooth start. There is something you want to promote or publicise, so make good use of the media and any form of communication. A trip to see someone rather special should put you in good spirits.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

You may own something that is valued highly by well-to-do people, so you should not discourage true experts from having a look. But keep your security under review. Beware of incidents that may weaken your resolution or distract attention. Your expert opinion may be sought; choose the venue yourself.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

An arrangement that suits your pocket can be made and should stand you in good stead for a long time. Parents will be more than happy to give you generous backing on your way to success. Don't hold back anything: do what comes naturally to you. •

First come, first serve

HEARD IN LUCKNOW

...and as I bid you goodbye,...Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan, Jai Ramzan.

DEFENCE MINISTER MULAYAM SINGH YADAV AT A FUNCTION AFTER THE RAMZAN HAD STARTED DURING THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

The residence of all political leaders — whether state or national level — are packed with ticket seekers. But the maximum crowd has been spotted, rather unexpectedly, at

Farooq Abdullah: doling out tickets

the Jammu residence of Kashmir chief minister Dr Farooq Abdullah!

The reason is obvious. In the last Lok Sabha, the National Conference did not have a single member — the party had boycotted the election. In this election, therefore, the pent up ambition to represent a state torn by strife has come spilling out.

The electorate has increased — by five lakh-odd — and so have the candidates prepared to face elections. Last time, the Congress had four seats. This time, their chances of getting even one look slim.

Desert storm

The way things are going, the Samajwadi Party is set to get at least one seat from Rajasthan.

With all the coming and going in Rajasthan Mulayam Singh Yadav's eyes are fixed on the Assembly election in October when his party can present an alternative to the Congress.

Already two sitting MLAs — Motilal Kharer and Gopichand Gurjar — have left the BJP and joined the Samajwadi Party. Deepa Singh of the Raja Mansingh family of Bharatpur has also joined Samajwadi Party. Mulayam Singh is working overtime to consolidate the Yadav vote elsewhere in the country. While Laloo waffles on about inconsequential Paswans and Deve Gowdas, Mulayam is holding press conferences to consolidate the Muslim vote bank.

CHECK-LIST

Sons and daughters of politicians

Jitendra Prasada: Has a son called Jiten Prasada, also called JP, so a certain amount of confusion is inevitable. JP (junior) is in his early twenties, works for Merril Lynch, is based at Bombay, and looks like his father. He is not, however, arrogant.

Rajesh Pilot: Sarika, the peppy pretty Pilot, runs a PR firm. Sachin, her brother, is studying at a Delhi college. Both are cheerfully irreverant about their father's political ambitions.

Kamal Nath: Nakul and Bakul Nath study in the US. They disco when they're in Delhi. So far, neither has shown any inclination to join politics.

Margaret Alva: Nikhil, Nirat and Mathura are all talented journalists. Nikhil and Nirat run an award-winning Star TV series called *Living on the Edge*. Mathura lives in Bangalore and was working, till recently, with a Delhi-based newspaper. The Alva children have a sense of humour and no airs.

The man to watch out for.

Strategic positioning

Suresh Kalmadi has reason to be happy.

Soon after he quit bondage and the Congress, he contested — and swept — the Pune municipal council elections. Sharad Pawar came to Pune to campaign for the elections and the next day Kalmadi's candidates were all declared winners.

Kalmadi showed sagacity and shrewdness by jumping on to the BJP bandwagon in the nick of time, and manag-

Suresh Kalmadi: striking the right balance

ed to maintain his relations with Sharad Pawar. As a result, he will probably win the Pune seat, keep his friends in the Congress, watch contentedly from the other side as Pawar tries to make friends with Kesri, and will magnanimously offer his help as an independent party when the Congress is in trouble at the time of government formation. That's what having your cake and eating it too is all about. •

Iftaar politics

Iftaar parties are all the rage — especially during the current season of alliances. There was a time when they were a status symbol — if the Prime Minister and celebrity came to your Iftaar party you were a somebody. Now, with election fever at its height, Iftaar parties are being used to strike

Mulayam Singh Yadav: gauging the Muslim mood

and cement alliances and bury enmity.

The most eagerly awaited Iftaar at the moment is Mulayam Singh Yadav's — though there is some uncertainty whether he will hold it in Delhi or Lucknow. Iftaar parties are useful for gauging the Muslims' mood — and so what if you haven't kept a Roza, you can hold one any way. Ram Vilas Paswan holds an Iftaar party over two days.

The PM's Iftaar has already been finalised and Muslims are awaiting their invitations eagerly.

Poles apart

Mulayam Singh Yadav might be defence minister, but if he had his way he would take the country to war. Consider the array of people he's fighting with: H.D. Deve Gowda, I.K. Gujral, the BJP and its allies, the BSP...

Given Yadav's aggressive secularism, differences with the BJP and all those who support it, are understandable. But why he has suddenly crossed swords with Deve Gowda is inexplicable.

Deve Gowda was Mulayam's strongest ally during the last election and the UP Assembly polls — when he told the Janata Dal (JD) that Mulayam Singh Yadav should be given more seats and the JD should come down from its high horse, because otherwise it would just be an invitation to the BJP to form the government.

The JD refused to listen to him. Finally, Deve Gowda went and campaigned for Mulayam and the Janata Dal himself in UP. The result was the JD's pathetic performance in UP in the Assembly.

But that was a long time ago. After that Mulayam was miffed by the fact that no one took his advice seriously . that President's Rule be imposed on UP, including Deve Gowda. The latter's name have been added to Mulayam's little black book and he now believes that Deve Gowda has 'lost his balance'.

HEARD IN THE AICC

Q: How do you set up a small party?

A: You set up a big party and make Sitaram Kesri its president.

A CONGRESS WORKER

CHECK-LIST

The United Front: who's fighting with whom

■ **Deve Gowda and R.L. Jalappa:** Every election is the launching of a new chapter in their feud. Gowda is a Vokkaliga, Jalappa is a Lingayat so the two can never co-exist. Jalappa feels Deve Gowda is vindictive, petty and crazed by power. Deve Gowda feels Jalappa is jealous, small-minded and unimaginative. The latest twist to their quarrel is the attitude the Janata Dal should have towards R.K. Hegde. Jalappa has threatened to leave the Janata Dal and join Lok Shakti. Whether he carries out this threat remains to be seen.

■ **Mulayam Singh Yadav and Inder Kumar Gujral:** Mulayam believes a friend of the BJP is an enemy of the United Front. I.K. Gujral feels BJP allies may be friends of the moment, but this doesn't mean they are intrinsically communal. Mulayam says the Akali Dal supported the Anandpur Sahib resolution. Gujral says that was all a long time ago. The issue is Jallandhar, the seat Gujral wants to contest in the Lok Sabha. Mulayam is telling him he will ensure a safe seat for Gujral from UP, if only he would give up the company of the Akalis. The matter is still to be sorted out.

■ **Ram Vilas Paswan and Laloo Prasad Yadav:** Laloo sees Ram Vilas as a foe who didn't stand up for him when the former was in trouble. Ram Vilas knows he can't win his seat without Laloo's support, but also claims there is a groundswell of opinion against Laloo. Janata Dal observers in Bihar say things will be tough for Ram Vilas this time. Paswan will need a lot of courage to contest in Hajipur.

■ **Srikant Jena and the Orissa unit of the Janata Dal:** The Orissa Janata Dal unit believes Srikant Jena is a losing candidate. Jena is obviously keen to prove them wrong and will even seek the help of Congress(I) chief minister J.B. Patnaik to do so.

Vocal taxation

Just his luck! It was his hour of triumph and he lost his voice! P. Chidambaram had to get P.C. Ramakrishna, the Voice of Madras to read out his speech at the meeting of the Confederation of Indian Industry at Madras last week because of a bad attack of laryngitis.

This was the first major conference after the VDIS results were out. Chidambaram croaked through the questions with the opening remark that when he was no longer finance minister, he was available for the advertising industry for a career.

Jaswant Singh, who also seemed to be on the brink of imposed silence, remarked, in a rasp that he only had a sore throat, but the finance minister had lost his voice; such was the effect of VDIS.

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SUNDAY

Ratan Tata takes on Maruti

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Cover transparency: V. Rajagopal (Ratan Tata)

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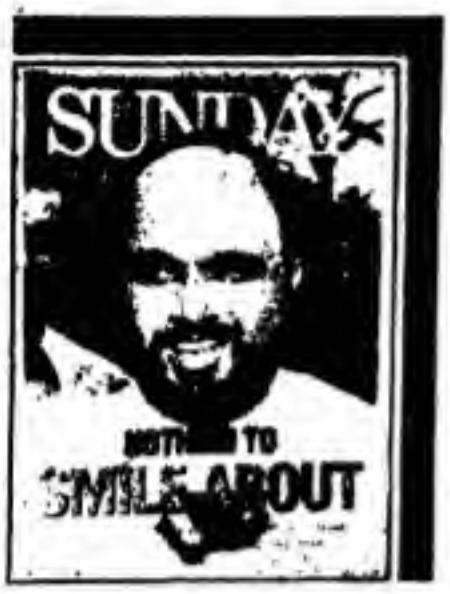

Fall from grace

This refers to your cover story, *Of letters and credit* (11 — 17 January). You have rightly pointed out that Prafulla Mahanta "who belonged to the rare, almost vanishing breed of politicians whom power cannot corrupt" has changed quite dramatically in this term.

Chosen as 'the man of the year 1988' by the *Current*, Mahanta has fallen from grace. His government's most glaring mistake, as has been correctly pointed out by your correspondent, is its 'soft' stand on the ULFA. During his second term, Mahanta has lost many old friends thanks to his 'uncharacteristic' political will. His reluctance to take a stand on the foreigner's issue and his failure to initiate developmental programmes have given enough fodder for the anti-Mahanta canons.

Rajen Hazarika, Guwahati (Assam)

■The transformation of Mahanta from a soft and indecisive titular head to an almost autocratic man of action can be attributed to his aspiration for a national role in politics.

Having found an important place in Delhi durbar, Assam CM isn't ready to let it go. An all-out war against the ULFA is a political requisite. And for which he was even ready to take on Tata Tea.

Prafulla Mahanta: hard times

But now, Mahanta's peace process and his political future could trip at the LoC hurdle.

Sipra Chaudhury, Calcutta (West Bengal)

Carnage caper

The brutal killing of 61 people in Batan Tola by the Ranvir Sena deserves condemnation by all right-thinking people.[*Bloodbath*, (14—20 December 1997)]. The victims haven't committed any sin except to fight for their rights. Should they pay with their blood?

Can the Rabri Devi government escape its responsibility from this horrifying state of affairs? Rabri Devi said she felt sorry for the victims. Will that bring back the dead to life? And what plans her government has to prevent such shocking incidents from being repeated? Maybe she will say a sorry next time too.

When 10 Dalits were killed in police firing in Maharashtra some time back, the Opposition demanded the dismissal of the BJP-Shiv Sena government in the state. Strangely enough, the Opposition in Bihar is keeping mum when more gruesome and cold-blooded murder had taken place in the "social justice Raj" of Rabri Devi

L. Rohini, Tiruchy (Tamil Nadu)

Lost legacy

This refers to your story, *Soullesscelebrations*(4 — 10 January), Mirza Ghalib was a poet by nature. He had a urban mind. His poetic image is 'man' himself. The poet left behind him a Deevan of Ghazals in Persian as large as the Urdu Deevan. He had friends from all religions. He held all mankind to be his kin and looked upon all men — Muslims, Hindus, Christians — as his brothers, no matter what others think.

Ghalib was a practical man and had a remarkable foresight. His poetry would always be an inspiration to future generation. But look at the way we offer our homage to this great poet on the occasion of his 200th year of birth anniversary!

Md.Tanweer, Calcutta (West Bengal)

Shades of Mahatma

Congratulations for choosing K.R. Narayanan as 'Man of the year 1997' (4 — 10 January). Nobody deserves the title more than this man from Kottayam does.

As President of India he literally made his detractors eat their words by rising up to the occasion even when the most difficult situation arose. His solving the UP crisis in particular deserves praise. He didn't yield to UF Cabinet's recommendation to impose President rule in UP and by calling the Cabinet's bluff, he saved democracy in one of its darkest hours.

He has proved to the Dalits that with true grit and determination one can rise above the shackles of caste barriers without having to resort to militancy. One does see shades of Mahatma in him. This self-effacing President of India seems to be the much-needed ray of hope to the millions of disillusioned citizens of our country.

Ms Nalini Sudhakaran, Trivandrum (Kerala)

■Few can question your sagacity in having nominated K.R. Narayanan 'the man of the year 1997'. [4—10 January).

You have rightly said that he did not play any politics in the UP fiasco. The political leaders who were precisely planning this had to hang their heads in shame when the expected did not take place. What happened in UP afterwards is a different story. But what the President did showed him as the guardian of spirit.

Narayanan's impartiality in analysing problems are appreciated by everybody. It is only the vested interests who paint him as Dalit and hence his elevation to the highest office. Probably he is

K.R. Narayanan: saving democracy

cleaner than the cleanest "forward" class people who had occupied this august post earlier. He is a gentleman first and foremost, a decent head of the nation and above all the most sophisticated catholic in his outlook.

Dr U.S.Iyer, Bangalore (Karnataka)

Dignity in death

This refers to the story, *The good Bangalorean* (4—10 January). Mahadeva's efforts to give dignified burial to unclaimed corpses in Bangalore deserve kudos.

I salute him for his sense of satisfaction in doing something which others abhor. While the civic authorities pay scant attention to arranging burial to the unclaimed bodies, Mahadeva took upon this job with unflagging zeal.

As the civic authorities and government hospitals are sunk in corruption, Mahedeva has been doing yeoman service. I am glad that your correspondent has done the right thing in projecting this true servant of the people.

Swati Chaturvedy, Bangalore (Karnataka).

Advantage BJP

Apropos *Southern comfort* (28 December—3 January 1998), the reported tie-up between the BJP and AIADMK is only a tactical move to prevent the Congress from joining hands with the AIADMK. Since the Congress would not go for a tie-up with the alleged conspirators in the Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, it is now a three-cornered fight among the DMK, AIADMK and the Congress.

Therefore, there will be division of votes instead of a one-to-one fight. Any Congress loss is a gain for the BJP-AIADMK alliance.

R.N. Vaswani, Bombay (Maharashtra)

New face of Laloo

This refers to the story, *He's back* (21—27 December, 1997). After four and a half months in prison, Laloo Prasad Yadav is out to take political centre-stage.

As Laloo is determined to make up for lost time and his party — the Rashtriya Janata Dal — is out to form a 'secular front' to keep the communal forces at bay in Bihar and Delhi, the coming few weeks will see his *tamasha*.

Laloo has announced in a press conference that he was teaming up with Congress to oppose the BJP and advised

Laloo Prasad Yadav: forging new alliance

the Janata Dal, his erstwhile party to wind itself up. With just a few weeks to go for the general election, it remains to be seen whether the people of Bihar will be taken in by the new face of Laloo.

Dayaldas V.K., Bombay (Maharashtra)

Killer instinct

I refer to the story, *For their sport* (21—27 December 1997). The killing of birds at Hokersar sanctuary in Kashmir by the so-called elite of the society, which include Nawab of Pataudi and his actress wife Sharmila Tagore deserves condemnation by the right-thinking citizen of the country

We know the goverment cannot do anything as Farooq Abdullah is an ally. But other political parties like the Congress and the

Nawab of Pataudi: royal passion

BJP and the so- called 'Left' must raise a hue and cry and bring the culprits to book.

It is imperative that all animal and bird lovers form a vote bank so that we can decide to vote for the party which clearly spell out in their manifesto to do something to stop cruelty to birds and animals.

Mrs M. Sen, Madras (Tamil Nadu)

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Wife of Siddhartha Shankar Ray

Contributed by Bhyamal Kumar Manna, Calcutta (West Bengal)

MILESTONES

APPOINTED: Professor Siddheswar Prasad, as Governor of Mizoram, on 14 January. He succeeds P.F. Kyndiah, who resigned to contest the Lok Sabha polls as a Congress candidate.

AWARDED: to poet Ali Sardar Jafri, the 1997 Jnanpeeth Award, for his outstanding contribution to the enrichment of Indian literature.

CHOSEN: legendary Carnatic vocalist M.S. Subbulakshmi, for the

Bharat Ratna. She is the only musician to be honoured with India's highest civilian award.

DIED: educationist and former Union minister Triguna Sen, on 11 January, in Calcutta. He was 93.

DIED: Gandhian, freedom fighter and former Prime Minister Gulzarilal Nanda, on 15 January, in Ahmedabad, after respiratory failure. He was 99.

EXPELLED: P.K. Thungon, former Union minister, from the Congress party, for six years, on 12 January. He was expelled for indulging in 'anti-party activities'.

SIGHT & SOUND

SUDHIR TAILANG/THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

■ They should come with a long-term perspective in mind and be a participant in the development of the country and should not be seen as liquidators of Indian industry.

ATAL BEHARI VAJPAYEE, *senior BJP leader, on the role of multinational corporations*

■ We have set a pattern for the future and the United Front was the first true coalition government.

G.K. MOOPANAR, *Tamil Maanila Congress president, pointing out that coalition governments are here to stay in India*

■ I have always opposed attitudes, like anti-Congressism or anti-any party...including the BJP. This should not be the approach to fight communalism.

CHANDRA SHEKHAR, *Samajwadi Janata Party leader, justifying his decision to align with Laloo Prasad Yadav*

■ I will contest the polls on a positive note. My slogan is: job for every hand and water for every village in this tribal area. I'm pained to see that even after five decades of Independence, no political party has ever thought of these basic issues.

RUSSI MODY, *former Tata Steel chairman, on why he decided to contest the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls from Jamshedpur*

■ If a single Akali flag is seen in Mr Gujral's constituency, I will not join his campaign.

HARKISHEN SINGH SURJEET, *CPI(M) general secretary*

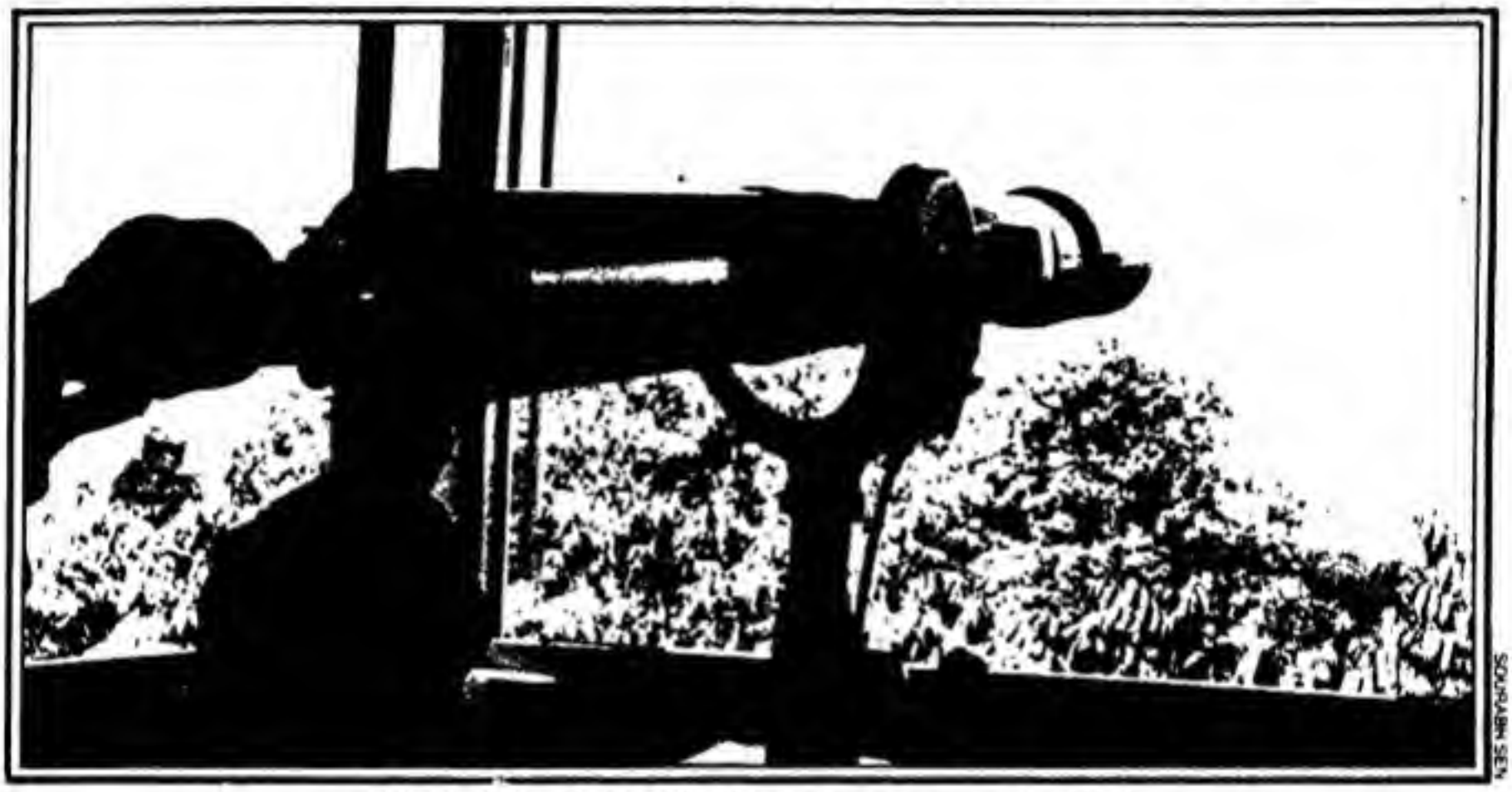
■ A Hindi film heroine can't possibly have pre-marital sex.

KAJOL, *film actress*

SEEN

A LONG VIEW

Looking at the Himalayas through Hitler's telescope



SOURABH SEN

THE FUEHRER'S WATCHING: *the instrument at the HMI*

It is the last few days of 1997, and the morning sun above Darjeeling, swimming across a clear blue sky, is cajoling the mercury to go up by a few notches from a near zero.

The mall wears a pleasant look. Groups of tourists are sipping coffee to brave the chill. The meditating ponies are taking a break, thinking of the hard days ahead.

Down the road skirting Raj Bhavan, one still gets the flavour of vintage Darjeeling, where light and shade romance the towering pines. The road takes you to the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute.

The institute has inspired many a brave soul. A famous mountaineer had once remarked that mountains have to be climbed and 'conquered' "just because they are there". And mighty mountains are there in Darjeeling, with Kanchenjunga flanked by her snow-clad escorts.

From HMI, I needed a vantage position to capture this entire range in its full regalia. A small cottage was standing in the way. From inside, one could get a better angle. I peeped through the glass windows.

Inside, there was a telescope — about seven to eight feet in length and nearly ten inches in diameter. It stood on a tripod and strange cables were dangling from it.

The instrument did not look contemporary. It had an old-world charm. It had a certain kind of arrogance, a touch of invincibility, built into it. I persuaded my friend at HMI to unlock the door.

From the blue steel outer casing to the brass adjustment knobs, it was Carl Zeiss all right. Seen through the telescope, Kanchenjunga looked right next door. So did the other peaks. There was a board in front, identifying the peaks. One could even locate the villages nestling precariously at Kanchenjunga's feet.

Where did they find the instrument and why was it tucked away in a corner, I asked my friend. Out came a fascinating story.

The telescope belonged to none other than Adolf Hitler. Yes, the fuehrer himself! He gave it to Maharana Judh Shamsher Jung Bahadur Rana, the then king of Nepal. The telescope came to HMI in 1961 when Nepali king General Shamsher Jung Bahadur Rana gave it to the institute.

There are only two such telescopes now. While one of them is installed at the HMI, there is no trace of the other. No one knows why the fuehrer needed the telescope, or for that matter, why he gave it away.

There are problems in preserving such a gadget. The specialised coating on those Zeiss lenses are very delicate and susceptible to the vagaries of weather. The adjustment knobs cannot take in dust. Naturally, one needs special permission to enter the observation room.

Before coming out, I trained the lens at Kanchenjunga one last time. The feeling was eerie. The Alps could hardly pose a challenge to those steely blue eyes. Would Kanchenjunga have proved to be different? •

Sourabh Sen/Darjeeling

No one knows why the fuehrer needed the telescope, or for that matter, why he gave it away

Always the bridesma

One in a series profiling the views of major political figures: **Jitendra Prasada**, *the Congress vice-president*

Jitendra Prasada: rising above UP politics

As the Congress vice-president, Jitendra Prasada occupies a curious slot. Technically, he is the official voice of the party president. At the very least he should generally agree with what Sitaram Kesri says.

But ever since he took over as No. 2, Prasada has disagreed more often than he has agreed with Kesri. He declared his independence in August itself—barely a month after he had shifted into his new office. At the party's plenary session in Calcutta, he refused to support Kesri's panel for the Congress Working Committee elections. Instead, he released his own list.

And later, when he made his speech, Prasada took his cue from Sonia Gandhi rather than the Congress president: he spoke of the need to get back in touch with the grass-roots voter. The speech was a historic one in the sense that it established Prasada's place in Kesri's Congress: he was 10 Janpath's man.

What began in August last year, crystallised in November. Prasada vied with the ultimate Sonia acolyte, Arjun Singh, to demand the tabling of the Jain Commission report. He was one of the hardliners who forced Kesri to withdraw support from the I.K. Gujral government on this issue.

So, is he a 10 Janpath yes-man?

Not quite. He can take a stand that may not be in keeping with the 'silence of 10 Janpath as interpreted by Arjun Singh'. Such as on the issue of denying Narasimha Rao a ticket for the coming elections. (Sonia has still not forgiven Rao for the delay in the probe into her husband's death.)

Whereas Madhavrao Scindia, Arjun Singh and Kesri are keen to deny the former Prime Minister a ticket, Prasada is one of the three who have been arguing in Rao's favour. The others being Pranab Mukherjee and J.B. Patnaik. Of course, Prasada's official line is that he has no individual opinion. He'll agree with whatever the party's election committee decides.

The answer is the same on the question of whether the party should apologise for the Babri Masjid demolition. "The party's stand is stated in the (Congress) resolution," he says. What he leaves unsaid is that at the plenary session, Arjun Singh had demanded that the party should apologise in the resolution. Prasada was one of those who had differed with Singh and ultimately the Thakur had to back down.

d; never the bride

As the party's No. 2, Prasada has had to do a fine balancing act. After his little revolt in August, Kesri totally sidelined him in the party affairs. Prasada's friends such as Nawal Kishore Sharma and Digvijay Singh were not nominated to the CWC. Moreover, Kesri started favouring his rival, Madhavrao Scindia. He let it be known that Scindia was his candidate for the job — whatever the job may be. Another Prasada-baiter, N.D. Tiwari, was made Uttar Pradesh Congress chief.

Prasada disagrees that he has been sidelined in Kesri's Congress. "I am the No. 2," he says in apparent amazement. "Where is the confusion? In the party's hierarchy the vice-president is the No. 2," he adds.

Again, this is a post he has had some practice at handling. He was the No. 2 man in both Rajiv Gandhi and Narasimha Rao regimes — a distinction he shares with Ghulam Nabi Azad.

Whereas it is easy to identify Azad's fawning brand of political mobility, Prasada moves in more subtle ways. Yet, both have the same measure of success. They always land up close to those who matter. Where Azad works as a sort of political fixer — all with a polite smile and the choicest of Urdu couplets — the Brahmin from Shahjahanpur, UP, has not had it so easy.

His aloof and reserved manner gives the impression of a cold and unapproachable sort of fellow. He got his first break under Rajiv Gandhi, when the latter, disillusioned with the likes of M.L. Fotedar and R.K. Dhawan, was looking for someone with a cleaner image. Prasada was offered the job of Rajiv's political secretary, and continued to function in the same capacity for Narasimha Rao.

There he lost out to a fellow Brahmin. When Bhuvanesh Chaturvedi made sure that he was shunted out of Rao's PMO, there were few who stood by him. But Prasada spent his time as UP state party chief profitably. The accusation was that he was a leader without base. As PCC chief, he cultivated the grass-roots worker. And when the time came for the party's presidential elections, Prasada had acquired enough base to decide Kesri's fate. In return, he was made party vice-president.

Where does Prasada stand in Kesri's Congress?

He is not part of the inner coterie which consists of Madhavrao Scindia, Tariq Anwar and Pranab Mukherjee. Whereas Anwar and Prasada differ on Uttar Pradesh, he has always regarded Scindia as a potential rival. And vice versa.

Although Prasada is the obvious rallying point for those upset with Kesri, he is not too closely identified with either Sharad Pawar or Narasimha Rao camps. For the time being, he is content to take refuge under a safe tag of '10 Janpath loyalist', even if that means sharing a platform with such *betes noires* as Ghulam Nabi Azad and Arjun Singh.

Regarding party issues, it is hard to get Prasada to say anything other than the official party line. When asked who his candidate for prime ministership would be, he smiled and echoed the party line. "It is for the Congress parliamentary party to elect the party's candidate for Prime Minister."

Even if it elects Madhavrao Scindia?

"Yes. If the MPs elect him, then why not?"

Clearly, the Brahmin from Shahjahanpur was in a diplomatic mood. This became even more evident when he listed the likes of N.D. Tiwari, Arjun Singh and Scindia as the party's star campaigners and leaders.

And went on to make an even more incredible statement. "I am confident that the Congress will get a majority in the coming elections." According to him, the party can only improve on its earlier performance. "In Rajasthan we will gain five to seven seats; in Madhya Pradesh we should get as many as 20; in Uttar Pradesh we can only improve..."

In fact, Prasada has even toned down his anti-Mulayam (Yadav) stance. "I was against him politically when I was PCC president, as I wanted to build up the organisation. But now, as far as strengthening the secular forces is concerned... Let's see if the question of an alliance comes up," he says.

But he has risen above Uttar Pradesh politics. It now remains to be seen if he can transcend the No. 2 tag. •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

Kesri started favouring Madhavrao Scindia. He let it be known that Scindia was his candidate for the job — whatever the job may be

INDER MALHOTRA

Face-off

Iraq and the UN Special Commission lock horns

There may be a sense of *deja vu* about the renewed crisis between Iraq and the UN over the world body's search for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction suspected to be hidden at various sites. But this time around, Saddam Hussein has chosen to obstruct inspections by a team of the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) that gives him greater leverage than in the previous disputes and stand-offs during the seven years since the "mother of all wars".

Even in the previous tussles with the US-led coalition, the wily President of Iraq had succeeded in making his point even though he was prudent enough not to go too far but to compromise at the last minute. But after the confrontation in November last year, the UN Security Council would meet and denounce "obstructionism" and "violation" of the council's mandatory resolutions; the United States would be the loudest in warning the Iraqi leader; and sometimes its threats would be followed by the firing of some cruise missiles at targets in Baghdad.

At that point, Saddam would find some way to backtrack without too much loss of face, and there would be resumption of business as usual. Meanwhile, he would have demonstrated to his own people and to the outside world that, though defeated decisively in the Gulf War, he could force the UN to negotiate with him and thus accept the legitimacy of his leadership.

In November, there was a significant change in the established pattern. Until then, there usually was a broad agreement among the five permanent members of the Security Council that Iraq must implement the UN resolutions by allowing UNSCOM inspectors to do their job, and that, in the event of Iraqi failure, punitive action should follow. Two months ago, the agreement on the first point, the Iraqi obligation to abide by the UN demands, held and continues to hold now. But on the need and desirability of punitive action the unity of the P-5 has broken down, as has been underscored once again, by the refusal of France, Russia and China to back American plans to take "military action" against Saddam. Only Britain remains an obedient camp-follower of the US.

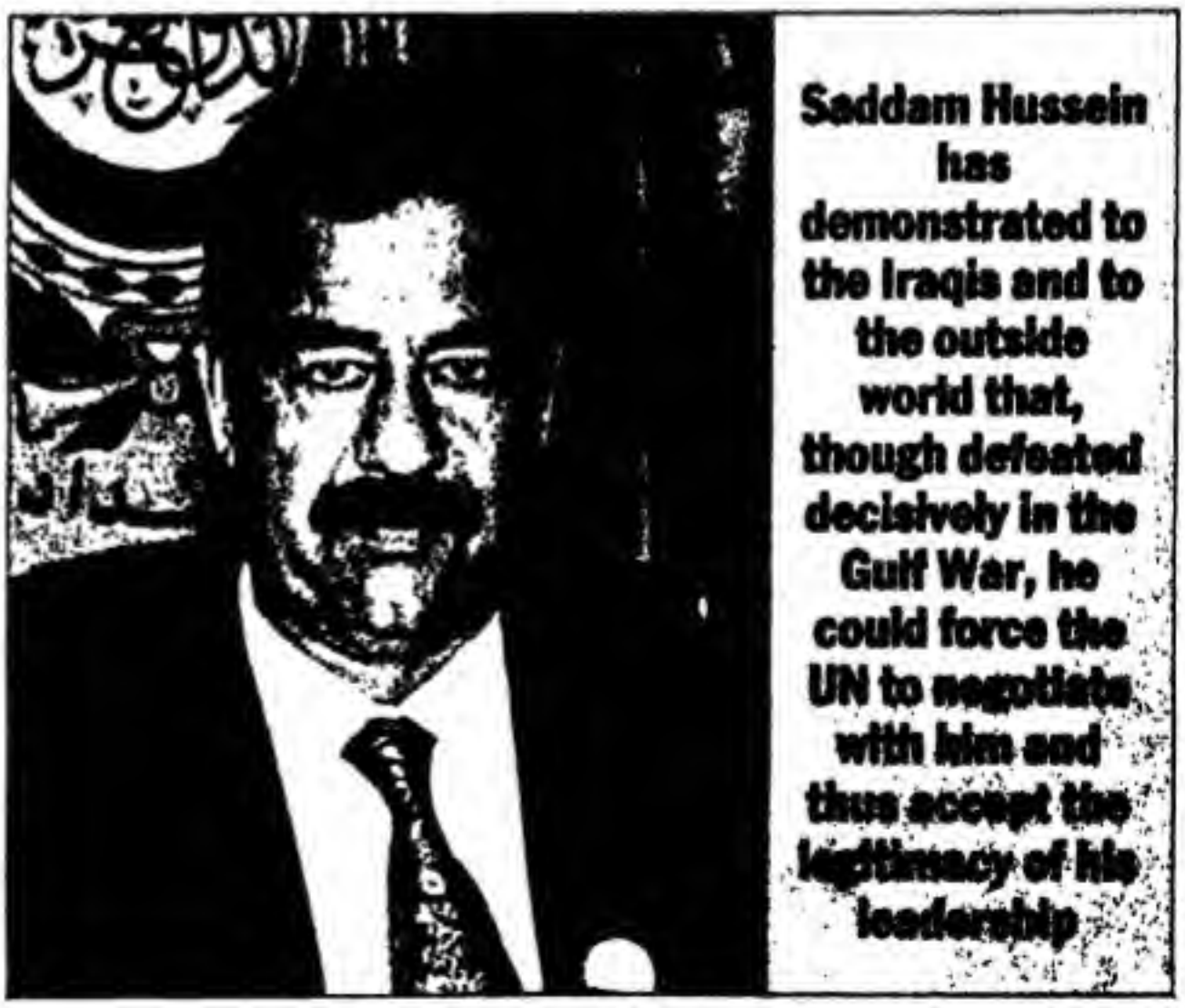
In fact, in November, Saddam was persuaded to rescind his order expelling American inspectors (but allowing those of other nationalities to continue their work) by Russia on the strength of a solemn promise that Moscow would get the crippling UN economic sanctions on Iraq lifted "quickly". Boris Yeltsin and his foreign minister, Yevgeny Primakov, have failed to deliver.

The Iraqi leaders' hands have been strengthened also by the strong resentment among America's Arab allies against the wilful destruction of the West Asian peace process by the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, about which the US is doing precious little.

It is in this context that Saddam Hussein has picked on a powerful and emotive issue to take on the UN, really the US. A special UNSCOM team consisting of nine Americans, five Britons and only two others has been sent to Iraq on a special assignment. Saddam says, quite properly, that he would allow a more balanced team but not the one so heavily dominated by Americans and Englishmen.

Strangely, no one faces up to this pertinent problem. Certainly not Bill Clinton who is an artful dodger of embarrassing questions as a draft dodger during the Vietnam War.

He is threatening unilateral American military action if the security council does not sanction a collective riposte. But someone should ask him how he would feel if firing a few more missiles on Iraq pushes up the oil prices. On top of the East Asian and South-East Asian economic crash, such a development would be catastrophic for the entire globe. •



Saddam Hussein has demonstrated to the Iraqis and to the outside world that, though defeated decisively in the Gulf War, he could force the UN to negotiate with him and thus accept the legitimacy of his leadership

RAJIV SHUKLA

Present continuous

Why does I.K. Gujral believe that he will remain Prime Minister?

I think Prime Minister I.K. Gujral is busy working out a new Gujral doctrine — how to continue as Prime Minister even after the polls. At the moment, there is very little chance of his becoming PM again. But that isn't stopping Gujral from taking decisions as if he has a five-year-term ahead of him.

According to current political calculations, either Atal Behari Vajpayee or somebody from the Congress will be occupying the Prime Minister's Office after the elections. Jyoti Basu is the only other leader who has an outside chance — backed by the Left and other constituents of the United Front. Gujral, as PM, has no takers even within the UF. A powerful lobby within the Janata Dal, headed by predecessor H.D. Deve Gowda, is also determined to shut the doors on the Prime Minister.

But Gujral does not seem bothered about all this and is busy chalking out his own plans. What he must be banking on is post-election confusion, forcing a peculiar combination of political powers at the Centre. This could help him emerge as the least-objectionable choice as Prime Minister.

Gujral believes that if Kesri fails to land the top job, Gujral could be backed by a Kesri-led Congress. With the Congress behind him, Gujral would then manage the support of the Telugu Desam Party, the Assam Gana Parishad, the Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Tamil Maanila Congress and the Akali Dal.

In order to woo the Akalis, Gujral has decided to share the platform with the Akali Dal in Jallandhar. This despite vehement opposition from some UF quarters like the Samajwadi Party, the CPI(M), and even the Janata Dal. Gujral does not believe that the Akalis are communal and is determined not to alienate the Sikhs anymore. He has turned down repeated requests from his partymen and coalition partners not to share the platform with the Akali Dal.

Clearly, Gujral is setting his own agenda. During his recent visit to Dhaka, he was hardly acting like a 'caretaker' Prime Minister. In fact, he did not like it one bit when the leader of the Pakistani business delegation addressed him as 'caretaker Prime Minister'. Diplomats accompanying Gujral were most upset over the remark and felt that it was a deliberate attempt by Pakistan to humiliate the Indian Prime Minister.

Gujral even took the opportunity to make several long-term policy announcements, including reduction of tariff and installation of a joint international power grid by India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The Indian Prime Minister also declared that a free-trade-area in South Asia would come into being by the year 2001. He urged Pakistan to issue the consolidated national schedule giving effect to the Second SAPTA Agreement. He also advised Pakistan to trade with India according to the international commitments and obligations.

But I am just not able to understand how Gujral can be so confident of continuing as the 'Prime Minister of secular forces' after the polls. He must realise that it will either be a Vajpayee-led BJP or a Congress-led coalition that will come to power.

I still believe that Inder Kumar Gujral will be our best foreign minister, in any government. Provided he can reconcile himself to the switch from Prime Minister to minister. •

There is very little chance of I.K. Gujral becoming Prime Minister after the polls. It will either be a Vajpayee-led BJP government or a Congress-led coalition that will come to power

THE CAR MAN

THE TATA MINT

Ratan Tata unveils his dream car. But will the dream sell?

When the House of Tatas brought out the Sierra and the Estate, people didn't actually scorn. But they said: well, it's a truck-maker's idea of a car. You can't really blame them.

Ratan Tata not only took it to heart, he got rebellious. He decided he would make a small car. He would make it all by himself. And he would deliver the latest possible technology at the least possible price. And so, project Mint — mini car from Telco — began.

The first part of that project ended on 15 January, when the Mint's prototype was displayed at the Auto Expo in Delhi. And rarely has the launch of a product been such an emotional event. As he unveiled the car, a proud Ratan Tata said: "We have finally delivered. It is a dream of making an all-Indian car come true."

Industries minister Murasoli Maran snipped the ribbon and beamed: "This is a proud moment for all Indians because it is the first indigenously-developed car." At the launch party later that evening, Telco employees moved among the guests like proud fathers of a beautiful baby. For this one evening, they were in love with the world.

The business end of the project begins now, as Telco prepares for the commercial launch somewhere between September and December this year.

Though the project really took off in October, 1995, its specifications had been a carefully-guarded secret. But days before it was unveiled, Tata opened up and said he was offering the consumer something the Indian market had never seen before: a car with the power of an Esteem, the space of an Ambassador, the looks of a Zen at the price of a Maruti 800. More, he is offering them an *Indian* car.

But on 15 January, one thing became clear — the Mint is anything but a mini car. The specifications are impressive: a 1400 cc engine with 53.5 horse power (hp) for the diesel version and 60 hp for the petrol version; a 1.6-metre-wide body; and weighing 900 kgs (heavier than the Esteem). The only thing that could possibly be small about it is the price Ratan Tata has promised.

It is a potent combination. As a senior Maruti official said: "*Agar woh Maruti-ke daam par Ambassador ki jagah denge to hamara to baaja baj jaayega* (If they offer an Ambassador's space for the price of a Maruti, we'll have a tough time)." He is aware of the increasing complaints from consumers on Maruti's cramped interiors.

K. Mahesh, president of the Automobile Component Manufacturers Association (ACMA) is also thrilled with the space it offers: "The looks are very, very good. And so is the space. I am six feet tall, but with the front seat pulled back completely, I still had leg space in the backseat. Also, I have clear vision and head space in the front seat. Which is more than you can say for a lot of mid-size cars."

While the first reactions to the car are generally euphoric, it's not quite a cakewalk for Tata. For one, the small car market is amongst the most specialised of all car segments. For another, it is extremely difficult to penetrate, especially in a monopoly situation like India where Maruti holds over 80 per cent of the market share.

According to senior Suzuki officials from Japan, huge corporations in the past, including Japan's Toyota Corporation and the United States' General Motors, have found themselves stonewalled in this segment. General Motors

B.L. Passi: "This is the first project where the Tatas have poured in Rs 1,700 crore. They've set up an entire plant and it is really expensive"

Ratan Tata says he is offering something the Indian market had never seen before: a car with the power of an Esteem, the space of an Ambassador, the looks of a Zen at the price of a Maruti 800. More, he is offering an *Indian* car

is the world's largest automotive manufacturer, yet it couldn't stop Suzuki from invading the US' small car market.

Besides, a large number of established car companies are already fighting it out in India and not really getting anywhere. Fiat Uno is here but not here. Daewoo's Cielo has taken a bad beating and is continuing to do badly despite a huge cut in prices by over Rs 1 lakh. And with Daewoo, Hyundai and General Motors coming with their own small cars, by the end of the year, it is going to be a very crowded market.

According to a Maruti official, "The Koreans are the most deadly. They are not only reckless, they are aggressive. You have to watch out for them." Mahesh agrees, but for a different reason: "Hyundai and Daewoo small cars will be able to stay because the Korean currency has dropped."

General Motors has displayed its smallest car at the Auto Expo — the Corsa. According to GM India's national marketing manager Vinay Dixit, "At General Motors, India, we are very conservative in announcing product plans. The smallest in our stable is the Corsa. We are gathering feedback on the model displayed here. At the end of it, we should have a clearer configuration of the car we are going to bring in — perhaps in 15 to 18 months." But, he says, the Corsa will compete with Zen. "General Motors will never address the Maruti 800 market. We intend to be at the top end of any segment we make an entry into."

Daewoo Motors' Shubhendu Amitabh admits it's going to be a battle. "Daewoo, Hyundai and Telco getting into the small car segment will obviously affect the monopoly market scenario of today. We are all likely to launch around the same time this year."

Besides, Telco's largest distributor, B.L. Passi says the Tatas have never sunk in so much money on a dream.

TOTAL SALES

DAEWOO MOTORS
1995-96: 2534
1996-97: 13066
1997-98: 2703

PREMIER AUTO
1995-96: 13923
1996-97: 4135
1997-98: 8588

HINDUSTAN MOTORS
1995-96: 17625
1996-97: 16074
1997-98: 14696

[illegible] FORD
1995-96: -
1996-97: 0
1997-98: 5201

GENERAL MOTORS
1995-96: -
1996-97: 2668
1997-98: 6550

• *Total sales in numbers*
SOURCE AIAM

MARKET SHARE 1997-98

Daewoo Motors / Mercedes Benz / Telco
1%

Mahindra Ford / General Motors / Pal Peugeot
2%

Premier Auto
3%

Hindustan Motors
6%

Maruti Udyog
82%

"This is the first project where they have poured in Rs 1,700 crore. They've set up an entire plant and it is really expensive. The paint shop alone costs Rs 150 crore to Rs 200 crore." Still, Passi, who came to India during the Partition and built his Rs 600-crore empire single-handed, is hitching his wagon to the Mint. He is certain it will succeed.

Despite the bad market conditions, Ratan Tata does have a few things going for him. And first of them is the mess at Maruti.

The Maruti imbroglio works to Tata's advantage in more than one sense. While government and Suzuki officials slug it out over who should be managing director, the company's expansion and modernisation plans have suffered. A senior Suzuki official says: "Even if the arbitration proceedings are settled right now, we have already lost two years."

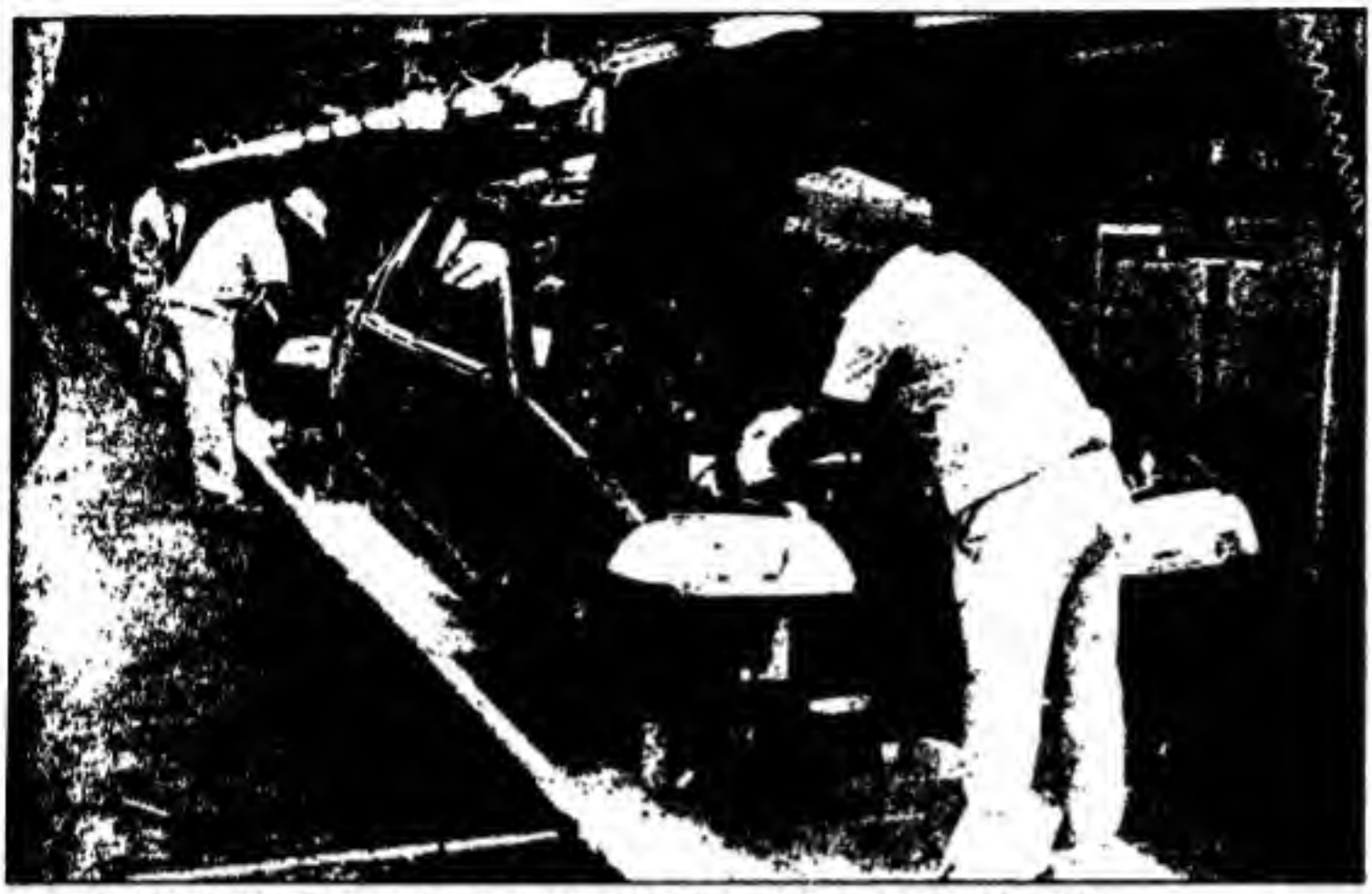
The reason: when Ratan Tata announced his plans for a small car, Maruti-Suzuki had decided to come out with an upgraded version of the Maruti. In a monopoly market it is okay to run with an 80's version of a car. In a competitive market, it can mean doom.

The idea, then, was that if the Tatas release their car in November, 1998, Maruti would come out with an all-new car in June, 1999. "We would have continued to sell the old cars in rural India where the Tatas can't touch us and we would have brought the new Maruti to clash with the Tatas in urban areas. By June, 1999, the Tata car would have begun to look old. They would have been decimated."

Now, of course, that's out. All expansion and modernisation plans are on hold pending arbitration between the government and Suzuki. When that arbitration is over and if a decision is taken to introduce a new car, it will still take Maruti two years to come into the market.

What is also causing jitters in Maruti is a little-known fact — the jigs and dyes at the Maruti plant have a stated production capacity of two million units (cars). Over 1.5 million cars have already been made. That means the plant can openly make upto another five lakh cars. If arbitration does drag on so long, by January, 2000, Maruti will be out of business.

That is the worst case scenario for Maruti. And, of course, the best case scenario for the Tatas and for any other small car entering the market.



Maruti Udyog: the Tatas have a lot to gain from the mess at Maruti

Murasoli Maran: his enthusiasm over the Tata car angered the anti-government faction in Maruti

K. Mahesh: "The looks [of the Tata Mint] are very, very good. And so is the space"

There is another fallout of the Maruti mess. With the government squabbling with Suzuki or vice-versa (depending on your point of view), suddenly the prospect of having an all-Indian car is very attractive.

The anti-government faction in Maruti says it is ironical that industries minister Murasoli Maran should have gone into raptures at the unveiling of the Tata car, while doing his best to crush all prospects of an existing and thriving Maruti. They even smell a conspiracy in it.

The pro-government faction at Maruti believes that a Tata car is a fitting response to Suzuki's high-handedness that came from its monopolistic hold on the market.

Either way, the government-Suzuki tussle could help Tata get that little edge into the market.

So, will the car succeed? Is this the end of the Maruti Monopoly? According to General Motors' Vinay Dixit, "It's a car that has been zero-base designed for India — an extremely creditable effort on the part of Telco. But while it's obviously very well-designed, what will determine its success is its actual performance. Combined with factors like production capacity, after-sales network, etc. More so now, because the customer's expectations from 'the Indian car' are very high."

ACMA's Mahesh feels there is room for both Maruti and Telco and maybe for a couple of others also. "Maruti will stay. I don't even think it will go down in volume. The demand is growing and I think Telco will start catering to that demand." That last year there was a waiting period for Maruti cars is an argument to support the belief that in the small car segment demand is not saturating.

Another major car company official says on the condition of anonymity, "The car is obviously far superior to the Maruti 800. But it has miles to go before it meets the Zen." Besides, he says, "Telco has a bad habit — they test their cars on the consumers. Performance, then, is the big question mark on this car."

Initial hiccups, however, are every new car's fate. In fact, experts recommend in private that no car should

SMALL WONDERS

MINT

1400cc
Bhp: 53.5
Kpl: 16*
H/l/w:1480mm
3660mm
1625mm
Lt: 37
Cost: 2.5-3 lakh*

D'ARTS

796cc
Bhp: 52
Kpl: 17
H/l/w:1485mm
3495mm
1495mm
Lt: 35
Cost: 3 lakh*

SANTRO

900cc
Bhp: 55
Kpl: 17
H/l/w:1615mm
3495mm
1495mm
Lt: 35
Cost: 3.15 lakh*

MARUTI 800

796cc
Bhp: 39.5
Kpl: 16
H/l/w:1405mm
3335mm
1440mm
Lt: 27
Cost: 2 19 lakh

MARUTI ZEN

993cc
Bhp: 50
Kpl: 14*
H/l/w:1405mm
3495mm
1495mm
Lt: 35
Cost: 3.49 lakh

** Approximate values*
Bhp: brake horse power
Kpl: Km/lt
H/l/w: Height/length/width

be bought in the first year of its introduction. (If they did that in public no car will sell.)

The other question is that of price. It is common entry strategy to price your product low and steadily increase its price as acceptability increases. Maruti itself promised to come at Rs 40,000, its first car sold at Rs 57,000 and now it sells for Rs 2.19 lakh. Will Ratan Tata stick to his promise of "at the price of a Maruti 800"? And for how long?

But if one were to treat the price declarations with caution, Tata still has a few advantages. Telco's long experience in the automotive industry will work for him. It is the largest commercial vehicles manufacturer in India; and it runs 70 per cent of the high and medium commercial vehicles sector. This means good infrastructure, dealer and after-sales facilities.

Also, while there is dispute over whether this is strictly an Indian engineering feat — Italy's IDEA and the French company Le Motore Moderne contributed a lot — it is not just an indigenous car, it is an Indian car.

To put it simply — while Maruti is 97 per cent indigenised and we have the knowhow, we still don't have the *know why* of the car. So too with Premier. That is, we know *how* something is made, but we don't know *why* it works the way it does. Result: while India can produce these cars, it cannot modify or improve on them. Telco not only knows how Mint works, but also knows *why* and can, therefore, improve on it if required.

And, finally, a man's dream is a powerful force. The Mint has been Ratan Tata's obsession for quite some time. He will not let it die easy. Only question that remains: will the Mint also fulfil the customer's dreams? •

Sarita Rani with Chitralekha Dhamija/New Delhi

MINT STRUCK

Telco's executive director V.M. Raval talks about the attention that the Tata small car has received

Q: Much of the emotion in Telco about this car seems to be: this is *our car*. This is an Indian car. Why was indigenisation so important for you?
A: We at Telco have been wanting to bring out a small car for a long time. When Morarji Desai was PM...but that is a long story. Let me just say that when a lot of people were entering the car industry with joint ventures (JV), we decided that JVs were not for us. We said that we are the Tatas. We have all the experience of design and engineering and we will bring out our own car.

Q: But IDEA of Italy has done most of the body design and you have taken help from the French company Le Motore Moderne for the engine. How much then is their contribution?
A: IDEA has only done the styling. As for the engines, we made the drawings and got them validated by the French. That's all.

Q: Don't you think you are entering the car market at the wrong time? It has been facing a major recession since last year and to enter at such a time...
A: I wouldn't say the recession has been uniform. Daewoo has not been doing well. But Maruti is doing better. Sumo (a Tata product) has done well, while Esteem has fared badly. Honda and TVS are doing okay. Also, the HCV and MCV (heavy and medium commercial vehicles) market has been worst hit. The LCV market has also been hit but not so badly.

Besides, we will be coming into the market in the last quarter of this year. And by that time we hope the situation will improve.

Q: Which segment are you targeting — the Maruti 800 or the Maruti Zen?
A: Our basic model will of course be competing with the Maruti 800. And our luxury model will be taking on the Zen.

Q: Do you think you are taking a gamble with a diesel car? After all, diesel prices are artificially controlled by the government. What if the controls are removed?
A: We will produce what the customer wants. We have the capacity to produce both. Besides, we haven't yet decided what the break-up of petrol and diesel cars will be.

Q: Do you think you can break Maruti's monopoly?
A: The market is big enough for everyone. Also, the Maruti was designed in the 80s. It is outdated. •

PLANS IN THE AIR

Differences in the civil aviation ministry stall the Tata airport and airline. But Ratan Tata is determined to become India's Paul Getty

The minister of state for civil aviation, Jayanthi Natarajan, was at a meeting with the American ambassador, Richard J. Celeste on a Monday morning when she got a file from the secretary, civil aviation, M.K. Kaw. The file was named 'Bangalore Airport'. M.K. Kaw informed the minister brusquely that she had to clear the file "within one hour".

This was after Kaw had called her at Madras over the weekend to tell her that the file must be cleared because the Prime Minister and the finance minister were personally interested in its clearance.

Natarajan, who is no pushover as ministers go, reacted calmly. Her reply said that she would issue appropriate

TECHNICAL SNAGS

How the Tata-Singapore project developed them

February, 1995: The proposal to set up Tata-Singapore Airlines Pvt. Ltd came up before the aviation ministry for approval. The Rs 2,400-crore project would have a 40 per cent equity investment by Singapore Airlines. This met the then aviation guidelines. Ghulam Nabi Azad, then aviation minister, rejected it on the grounds that no new airlines could be given permission to operate.

July, 1995: H.D. Deve Gowda's government was sworn in. The project came up before the new aviation minister, C.M. Ibrahim, who was not keen on the project. He believed that no foreign airline should be allowed to have large stakes in a domestic airline but the domestic airline could have foreign equity up to 40 per cent. This is, however, not a policy decision as yet. For example, Jet Airways had an existing pattern of 40 per cent equity held by foreign airlines.

December, 1996: The FIPB cleared the project. But the ministry of civil aviation was not informed of it.

January, 1997: There were leaks in the media claiming that the project has been cleared. The ministry was then formally informed. The proposal was sent to the Cabinet Committee on Foreign Investment for clearance.

January, 1997: The project came up for consideration before the Cabinet. While Ibrahim and Deve Gowda argued against it, then foreign minister I.K. Gujral, P. Chidambaram and Murasoli Maran were in its favour. They submitted a written note to the PM urging early clearance.

February, 1997: Ratan Tata held a press conference claiming that the project is all but through. He went on to announce the details of the project. This, despite the fact that the Tatas had still not been given a go-ahead from the aviation ministry.

April, 1997: The domestic civil aviation policy was cleared by the Cabinet. (This was just after the Congress had withdrawn support to the Deve Gowda government.) The new policy allowed foreign equity in airlines up to 40 per cent — but no foreign airline or airport authority was permitted to invest. Jet Airways was told that it would have to dilute and rework its foreign equity component as well.

May, 1997: The Deve Gowda government fell. I.K. Gujral was sworn in as the new Prime Minister. One of the first things he did after taking over was to transfer Yogesh Chandra, secretary, civil aviation, to a punishment post in the animal husbandry department (Chandra had been arguing against the project).

orders as soon as she was convinced public interest was satisfied. She then took the file to the Prime Minister and asked him what was so terribly important about the issue of clearing the new airport at Bangalore that civil servants were like cats on hot bricks.

What I.K. Gujral said to her is not known. But the fact is that two important Tata projects — the new airport at Bangalore and the proposed launching of the Tata airline in technical collaboration with Singapore International Airlines (SIA) — have divided the civil aviation ministry vertically.

Those in the ministry who want the airport project — Kaw leading the pack — say that it will solve all the problems of the badly overcrowded Bangalore airport. The Rs 1,213-crore project is to be executed by the Tatas in collaboration with Raytheon. Those who oppose the project say the project might be fine in principle, but the desperate hurry shown by the bureaucracy in seeking its clearance gives rise to some speculation.

C.M. Ibrahim: treading cautiously

The civil aviation minister, C.M. Ibrahim, and Natarajan, his deputy, pointed out as much in their note to the Cabinet. Ibrahim (who has a parochial interest in the airport — Karnataka is his home state) said that in the note prepared by the secretary, it wasn't clear whether the project was to be on the Build Own Operate (BOO) principle or whether it was to be a joint venture between the Tatas,

Instead, he installed M.K. Kaw in Chandra's place.

Kaw informally told the ministry that his daughter had been working [illegible] Consultancy Services [illegible] the aviation [illegible] equity would come in from foreign institutional investors. Singapore Airlines would not invest.

With all its supporters in place, it appeared that the Rs 1,475-crore Tata Airlines would finally see the light of day: Gujral was now the PM, the TMC and the DMK were for the project, as was the new secretary of civil aviation.

But Ibrahim was still at large. He found a catch in the new project. Ibrahim argued that the Tatas had agreed to a technical tie-up with Singapore Airlines. According to him, the foreign airline could use this as an excuse to muscle in on the project. For example, he says, fees for technical expertise could be disguised as royalty payments. The Tatas argued that such technical tie-ups are necessary to promote development of the sector. For instance, ModiLuft has entered into a technical agreement with Speedwinds, a British Airways-owned subsidiary.

October [illegible] Jet Airways [illegible] foreign [illegible] held by [illegible] Gulf Air.

[illegible] The proposal has been [illegible] by the FIPB. It now has to come up before the aviation

P. CHIDAMBARAM

ministry and the CCFI. However, there is little chance of the present aviation ministry clearing it. The Samajwadi Party and the Left have already voiced their disapproval. The aviation minister has, in the meantime, taken his first 'stalling measure'.

Ibrahim has applied to the Election Commission seeking its 'guidance': could a caretaker government approve the project? And can the Aircraft Acquisition Committee give the Tatas a no-objection certificate before the project has been approved? (Tata officials say that the airline will initially acquire seven aircraft. The number will go up to 18 in the next five years.)

In the meantime, the Tatas claim that the project is all but cleared (a repeat scenario of February, 1997). At a press conference in Bombay, Kaw stated that he saw no reason why the project should not be approved. The Tatas are equally confident. They claim that even if Ibrahim can stall clearance, the project has FIPB clearance, it meets the domestic policy guidelines, so the next government will have no choice but to okay it.

The Tata-Raytheon airport: who's for it; who's against it

THE MINISTERS

■ C.M. Ibrahim will not be hustled into signing anything. Jayanthi Natarajan will not be bullied. Both want a good deal for India. This is the bottomline. In principle, they are in favour of the project. They just want to make sure India doesn't lose out.

THE SECRETARY

■ M.K. Kaw thinks the Tata proposal is the best, and is impatient with silly objections raised by the ministers. With his abrasive style and self-important manner, he rubs most people the wrong way. Worse, he drops the Prime Minister's name in everything he does — no one likes people who pull rank.

Jayanthi Natarajan

Ratan Tata

THE TATAS

■ Are waiting and waiting and waiting...

Raytheon and the government of Karnataka.

Apparently, the ministry wasn't interested in such fine details. It just wanted the project cleared.

Both ministers pointed out that this was an important issue. If it was to be a joint venture project, then the government of Karnataka was giving 3,500 acres of land to the Tatas who were 52 per cent shareholders of the project, in return for just 6 per cent equity. Was an immovable asset like land worth just 6 per cent of the equity? What if the project were to fail? The Tatas would then have the use of 3,500 acres of government land and the Karnataka government would have to settle the claims of all those poor farmers who would be dispossessed — who would probably not vote for the Janata Dal — and, in addition, have a failed airport project on their hands.

This was not the only flaw in the proposal. It envisaged *all* cargo clearance to be diverted to the new airport. Both ministers said the Cabinet and the Karnataka government had to decide on this before the matter was pushed through by the Cabinet. Though the project has not been cleared by the government yet, there seems little doubt that it will be.

The airline project is a different proposition altogether.

'Mired in suspicion and controversy' is how the newspapers described the clearance by the Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB) last week to the Tatas' proposal to start an airline. The fact that the Tatas have got the project cleared by the FIPB *twice* is testimony to their anxiety to set it up.

It is a long story.

When the Tatas first mooted the idea of launching an airline with the help of SIA, the government flatly rejected the idea. The Congress government, with civil aviation minister Ghulam Nabi Azad as its spokesman, turned down the proposal for the same reason as C.M. Ibrahim, civil aviation minister with the United Front government. Both said that the world over, domestic airlines were protected and supported by the government. It was unrealistic to expect the Indian government to give away the Indian market and its consumers on a platter to a foreign airline, even if it did have an Indian partner.

Right or wrong, this became the basis of the civil aviation policy drafted by the UF regime. When the policy was announced, other airlines like Jet and ModiLuft had to renegotiate their agreements with their foreign partners. The Tatas also reworked their relationship with SIA — they now called it a Tata airline with technical consultancy with SIA.

This is the proposal which has been cleared by the FIPB, pushed by the ministry and the secretary. In a quiet celebration of triumph, Kaw remarked at a press conference in Bombay last week that he saw no reason why the project should not be approved.

He is not wrong. The major hurdle in the way of the Tata airline has been crossed, thanks to the endeavours of friends in government. The second hurdle is pushing it through the ministry of civil aviation to bring it before Cabinet.

This is proving to be more difficult. C.M. Ibrahim has referred the Tata airline clearance along with clearances for a clutch of other civil aviation-related projects to the Election Commission (EC). The EC will evaluate these, decide whether they violate the code of conduct governing caretaker governments, and then send them back to the civil aviation ministry, which will then forward the proposal to the Cabinet.

All of this could take two years. It is clear that the UF is not okaying the one project that would realise Ratan Tata's ambition: of owning an airline and becoming the Paul Getty of India. But it is equally obvious that the government which comes to power next will have to take a decision on this matter one way or another. •

Aditi Phadnis and Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

PRADIP SANYAL

Mulayam Singh Yadav: keeping options open

Aiming high

Samajwadi Party chief and India's defence minister Mulayam Singh Yadav is in a belligerent mood. And much of his ire is directed at none other than Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral and his Janata Dal. Being a shrewd politician, Mulayam clearly forsees a downturn in the fate of the Janata Dal and has evidently decided to distance himself from a sinking ship.

But it's not easy to break free from the United Front (UF) without being accused of splitting the alliance. That seems to be Mulayam's immediate worry. His second concern is to keep doors open for a dialogue with the Congress, despite the growing animosity between the UF and the Congress. This is surely a difficult tight-rope walk, but with his eyes set on the PM's chair, Mulayam is willing to risk the venture.

Mulayam Singh Yadav is openly projecting himself as the United Front's prime ministerial candidate

Thus, the dark, diminutive man, who until a few years back couldn't see beyond his home town Etawah, is presently eyeing Delhi with considerable interest.

The first time Mulayam was angry with Gujral was when the Prime Minister refused to accept UP Governor Romesh Bhandari's advice (sent apparently at Mulayam's behest) recommending President's Rule in the state following the fall of the BSP-BJP government. Then, his irritation seemed to increase after Gujral decided to contest from the Jalandhar Lok Sabha seat with the support of Akali Dal, an ally of Mulayam's bitterest political foe, the BJP.

"Now tell me, can I go to campaign from Jalandhar?" he rhetorically asked his partymen assembled at the SP state headquarters at Lucknow last fortnight, and the answer, predictably, was a chorus of "No". Inspired by this show of solidarity, he made a nasty dig at Gujral: "Just imagine someone without ten votes behind him becoming the

DHEERAJ DHAWAN

Tushar Gandhi (in the middle): man with a mission

Mahatma Gandhi's great grandson Tushar Gandhi was persuaded to join the Samajwadi Party by Raj Babbar. With Tushar in the fray, Mulayam says he is proud to offer a political platform to the "most neglected family of India"

country's Prime Minister!" he told the gathering amidst much laughter. And then his enthusiastic followers raised the slogan: *"Pradhan mantri kaisa ho, Mulayam Singh jaisa ho"* (Who should the country's Prime Minister be? Someone like Mulayam Singh, surely.) The present defence minister was airing his prime ministerial aspirations in no ambiguous terms.

This, indeed, has been the tenor of all Mulayam's recent addresses to party-workers or the general public. At a recent rally in Lakhimpuri Kheri, about 250 km from Lucknow, Mulayam kicked off his election campaign by thundering: "We have been humiliated not once but a number of times by the mandarins of the United Front...They are all liars who are trying to make people believe that they have sacrificed more than the Samajwadi Party for the cause of secularism."

The SP chief has so far been careful not to say directly that he was bidding for prime ministership. But at every meeting he is labouring the point that he had earlier withdrawn his claim for the benefit of others. "After the fall of Deve Gowda, I could have easily become Prime Minister if I wanted to. But I sacrificed that chair to maintain unity and integrity of the United Front, and here are those very people blaming me for causing harm to UF," he has been saying.

Obviously, Mulayam's attack is directed at former PM H.D. Deve Gowda, who had said that "Mulayam had done everything to destabilise the Janata Dal in UP." Gowda had also said, "If Mulayam thinks he can fight the BJP by demolishing the Janata Dal, he can go ahead."

Support for Mulayam's "rightful" claim is being subtly drummed up by his new-found Man Friday Amar Singh and his own cousin and senior member of the SP's think-tank Ram Gopal Yadav. The two have made it a point to constantly remind their audience that "by increasing the tally of the Samajwadi Party, we can ensure the return of the UF to power". And they also stress that "Mulayam alone would be in a position to lead the United Front this time".

To firm up his ground, Mulayam is devoting much of his energy to UP. "Some parties may have managed to get recognition as national parties simply because they have been formalised by the Election Commission in a couple of smaller states like Kashmir or Tripura. But for me, a national level recognition can come in real terms only if one is able to establish his party in UP and in Bihar," he explains. That's why he is in no mood to offer more than ten seats to the Janata Dal in UP from where he could send only 16 members to the previous Lok Sabha. In Bihar, he has struck a deal with rebel Congress leader Jagannath Mishra.

Mulayam realises that he can only increase his party's score by adding a few more seats from these two states. So, he is aiming for 50 per cent of the 85 Lok Sabha seats from UP, and hoping to grab 20 per cent of Bihar's 54 together with Mishra. "If we end up with a figure around 40, SP would have every chance of leading the UF government in a Parliament that is expected to be hung again," say party insiders.

Besides UP and Bihar, he also hopes to win a few seats in other states where his party has just managed to gain a toehold. He is particularly optimistic about SP's performance in Bombay, where the party has already announced the candidature of Tushar Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi's great grandson. Tushar Gandhi was persuaded to join the party by filmstar-turned-politician Raj Babbar, who is a SP member in the Rajya Sabha. With Tushar in the fray on an SP ticket, Mulayam says he is proud to offer a political platform to the "most neglected family of this country".

And the young Gandhi suits Mulayam perfectly when he refers to the BJP and its allies as "killers of Bapuji". Tushar says the SP—not the Congress — was his natural choice. "Today, I do not see any other party as close to the Gandhian ideals as Mulayam's. He is a

grass-roots man and that's what Bapuji always liked," he told SUNDAY.

The 37-year-old computer professional is perhaps the only one among the Mahatma's descendants willing to fight anyone trying to denigrate the leader. He had once stood up against the all-powerful Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray for speaking disparagingly about the Father of the Nation. Tushar had also taken to task STAR TV for objectionable remarks made about the Mahatma in the once-popular Nikki Bedi show. "I don't believe in turning the other cheek like my great grandfather," he says.

Again, he was in the limelight early last year when, after a prolonged court battle, he retrieved from a bank vault in Orissa an urn containing Mahatma Gandhi's ashes. The remains were immersed at the holy Sangam in Allahabad close to half a century after the Mahatma's assassination.

Like Tushar Gandhi, there are others whom Mulayam has won over. Significant among them is his former rival Balram Singh Yadav of the Congress. Balram Singh joined the SP even after Sonia Gandhi announced her decision to campaign in order to revive the Congress. With Balram by his side, Mulayam has little to worry about in his home turf, Etawah-Mainpuri, where Balram Singh was a constant source of threat earlier.

Mulayam's efforts at making new friends have also brought Rita Bahuguna Joshi, daughter of the late H.N. Bahuguna, to the SP. She was once the mayor of Allahabad and is expected to do well at the hustings because of her personal drive and lineage.

It is believed that the SP is also trying to persuade film actress Jaya Bachchan to join the party and is, in fact, thinking of fielding her at the prestigious Lucknow Lok Sabha constituency from where 13-day Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is all set to seek re-election. The only problem is that Amitabh Bachchan hasn't yet given the nod. But with Raj Babbar refusing to contest from Lucknow for the second time and choosing to remain in the Rajya Sabha, Mulayam is desperately looking for a high-profile candidate in Lucknow.

Amar Singh had managed to bring Jaya over to the city for a preliminary assessment. The occasion was the premiere show of her latest and much-publicised film *Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa*.

SNAPS INDIA

Mulayam was among the first few to welcome Sonia Gandhi's decision to campaign for the Congress. But once she raised the Ayodhya and Bofors issues, Mulayam said she should be cautious and must not "allow herself to be misled by some Congressmen"

Mulayam is said to be exceptionally keen to have Jaya Bachchan as his party's candidate because she could, he feels, provide him with a direct channel to the new centre of power in the Congress: Sonia Gandhi. Mulayam has long sought access to the lady of 10, Janpath, but hasn't quite succeeded. Two months back, he met Sonia Gandhi at the Navy Day function in New Delhi. Mulayam's mood was upbeat while talking of the event. "You see, she was smiling at me," he told a scribe in Lucknow, referring to a picture showing them exchanging pleasantries.

Mulayam was among the first few to welcome Sonia's decision to campaign for the Congress. "It's a good decision. It will help secular forces fight the BJP," he told mediapersons. But once she raised the Ayodhya and Bofors issues, Mulayam said she should be cautious and must not "allow herself to be misled by some Congressmen".

Mulayam is of the view that Sonia Gandhi mustn't harp on Ayodhya in her campaigns as that is likely to rake up the recent past. "Some people are sure to ask: who got the gates of the contentious shrine unlocked in the first place; who got the *shilanyas* of the temple performed," he points out. All this had happened when Rajiv Gandhi was the Prime Minister. "I have a lot of regard for her. She is a novice in politics and therefore could be easily misled," Mulayam feels.

Sure enough, Mulayam wants to keep channels open for a dialogue with the Congress. He reasons that Congress support would be indispensable in the event of a hung Parliament like the 11th Lok Sabha. He is hoping that he will become the next Prime Minister with the Congress' backing.

But whether this is a pipedream will become clear in a month's time. •

Bharat Pradhan/Lucknow

Empty rhetoric

The three-nation business summit in Dhaka belies expectations

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina talked ceaselessly pouring out her ideas on trilateral cooperation and collaboration. So did her Indian and Pakistani counterparts, Inder Kumar Gujral and Mohammad Nawaz Sharif, in the three-nation business summit held in Dhaka on 15 January. And the irony was that whatever one premier proposed at the meeting was effectively disposed of by the two others.

Of the three countries, only Bangladesh took full advantage of the business summit, the first of its kind in South Asia, a region battered by mistrust and strife. It made frantic appeals to its bigger neighbours India and Pakistan to guarantee zero tariff to the country's exportables.

An ever-smiling Sheikh Hasina, seated between the heads of governments of two warring countries, sought a better deal from them in terms of exports. She urged Gujral to consider urgently Bangladesh's proposal for giving zero-tariff access to exports from four South Asian least developed countries into India. In the same vein, she appealed to Nawaz Sharif to examine the possibility of extending this facility to the LDCs in South Asia including Bangladesh.

Hasina's sentiments were echoed in presence of Gujral and Sharif by her close aide and president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), Yousuf Abdullah Haroon.

Gujral looked blank when Haroon unveiled the stark scenario. The faster and deeper trade liberalisation in Bangladesh, he said, has allowed a huge inflow of goods from India. "This has crippled and closed down many of Bangladesh's industries," he pointed out.

Haroon went on: "Bangladeshi manufacturers and traders alike point to the flood of goods from across the border with India while they do not find the Indian market very accessible."

The leading Bangladeshi entrepreneur said although the Indian government had recently taken the necessary steps to reduce tariff on certain items, the desired effect would not be achieved unless the para-tariff, non-tariff and other barriers were dismantled.

He said that the trade figures reflected this clearly. Exports from Bangladesh to India are now worth 70 million US dollars while exports from India to Bangladesh are around 1.2 billion US dollars.

"As regards Pakistan, it was one of Bangladesh's traditional markets for jute and tea but unfortunately recent trends show a sharp decline in volume," said Haroon, one of the architects of the summit.

Expressing the same sentiments as Hasina did, he implored India and Pakistan to take affirmative action aimed at increasing the flow of investment from their countries to Bangladesh.

Gujral offered to Hasina to buy more goods from Bangladesh including natural gas to level off the staggering trade imbalance. The Indian Prime Minister used the forum to highlight what Delhi did to promote the South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA).

He said that under the first two rounds of SAPTA, India offered the maximum concessions covering around 8,000 tariff lines. "India also offered the deepest tariff cuts with special concessions to the least developed countries of South Asia including Bangladesh," he added.

Gujral was critical of Pakistan's non-cooperation in making SAPTA work. "Pakistan is still to issue the Consolidated National Schedule giving effect to the second SAPTA agreement," he reminded Sharif sitting nearby. He asked Islamabad to trade with India in line with its international commitments and obligations.

(From left) I.K. Gujral, Sheikh Hasina and Nawaz

Although Sharif spoke after Gujral, he did not make any mention of the points raised by Gujral.

The business summit was indeed a political victory that Hasina will use in the days ahead in domestic politics. However, a large section of Bangladesh's business community, which did not attend the summit, says it is nothing but empty rhetoric to divert attention from the harsh realities.

Mahbubur Rahman, former president of the FBCCI, said: "Multinational companies are finding India to be a vast market despite the fact that some restrictions still exist. So the multinational companies would like to set up their manufacturing units in India rather than having these facilities in Bangladesh and selling to India."

"These big companies having huge

Sharif: games PMs play

THREE IS A CHAOS

☞ Bangladesh wanted India and Pakistan to guarantee zero tariff to its exportables

• India and Pakistan remained silent

☞ Pakistan proposed that India take advantage of the pipeline running through that country to draw gas from the Gulf states

• India did not comment

☞ India stressed the need for a joint gas pipeline with Bangladesh

• Bangladesh made it clear that unless its gas reserve was determined, it could not make any commitment

funds know for sure that if they set up their factories in Bangladesh, they cannot sell their goods to India. But if they set up their factories in India, Bangladesh will also be their market," he pointed out.

Pakistan and India dismissed each other's suggestions to replace an era of tension with that of friendship and amity.

Pakistan finance minister Sartaj Aziz proposed that India take advantage of the gas pipeline that runs through Pakistan to draw natural gas from the Gulf countries. The proposal came during the closed-door working session of the summit.

Aziz said India has been proposing a gas pipeline through Pakistan for a long time and that the issue could be discussed thoroughly. He said Pakistan also needed India's support to extend its trade in the eastern part of the region.

The Indian delegation stressed the need for a joint Bangladesh-India gas pipeline. It said a joint pipeline could originate from the north-eastern Indian state of Tripura, pass through eastern Bangladesh where it could join the existing gas pipeline and make its way through western Bangladesh to West Bengal.

Bangladesh made no comment on the Indian proposal nor did India say anything on the Pakistani proposal.

Incidentally, Bangladesh's commerce and industry minister Tofael Ahmed last month rejected outright an Indo-American move to connect the country with a pipeline for carrying natural gas to several Indian states starved of energy. Bangladesh has made it clear that unless the country determines exactly the volume of natural gas reserve, it cannot make any commitment for selling it to India.

There are conflicting figures about Bangladesh's gas reserve. Energy minister Nuruddin Khan, who earlier estimated it to be 40 trillion cubic feet, later projected the reserve at 80 million cubic feet.

During his 60-minute tete-a-tete with Hasina in Dhaka on the night of 14 January, Gujral offered to buy natural gas from her country but also sought the immediate extradition of United Liberation Front of Asom general secretary Anup Chetia to India.

In fact, Gujral seemed to be the lone gainer of the trilateral business summit by using his presence in Dhaka to get a solid assurance from Hasina on a non-economic issue. He was told by Bangladesh that Dhaka would consider favourably an early extradition of Chetia, who was arrested in the Bangladesh capital on 21 December.

Gujral also renewed his contacts with Nawaz Sharif for the fourth time in Dhaka, following Male, New York and Edinburgh. The Prime Ministers of the two estranged nations gave the go-ahead to regular meetings at the foreign-secretary level to take steps that would bring the two peoples closer.

At the end of the day, Hasina was left in the backyard by seasoned diplomats from India and Pakistan when the big two refused to commit anything on any proposal that she made.

The summit adopted what it called the Dhaka Declaration, which was full of rhetorics that heads of state and government in this part of the world are habituated to. •

Rahman Jahangir/Dhaka

Jurist's prudence

Whichever way you look at it, Chief Justice Punchhi's case is different

Silence, you are assured, is golden. Make that base-metallic sometimes, and you are nearer. It was such a time last Sunday when Madan Mohan Punchhi became the 28th Chief Justice of India.

Seven months ago, such top lawyers as Shanti Bhushan, Ram Jethmalani and V.M. Tarkunde had apprised Presidents Shankar Dayal Sharma and K.R. Narayanan successively of seven cases of his alleged corruption. These came to the then Chief Justice J.S. Verma. *The Hindu* leaked this. Within days, lawyers were taking sides.

The Supreme Court Bar Association president, Kapil Sibal, expelled Bhushan and others and pressed Verma to scrap any investigation. Those in disagreement left it private. Punchhi sweated much in that hot summer at public functions but stayed quiet.

Backstage, damage control was apace. Prashant Bhushan, who is Shanti Bhushan's son, says that Sibal approached his father to drop the charges but he refused. It was rumoured that Verma had asked three judges to inquire into them. Newspapers reported Punchhi saying to a sympathetic lawyer that "*Jab aam kachcha hota hai to koi dhyan nahi karta. Jab woh pak jata hai to sab usko todne ke liye patthar marte hain.*" But no direct word came from him.

All of December there was a scare. After a 1993 Supreme Court judgement, the government has to accept the Chief Justice's choice of his successor. This is no problem because the senior-most judge is considered unless found "unfit" and the Chief Justice is anyway really powerless to take such a decision.

Impeachment is the only way, and the manner in which Justice V. Ramaswami escaped that shows how difficult that too is. So the scare was that Verma would make no recommendation and provoke a proper constitutional crisis. Now Punchhi had all the more reason to keep quiet.

Early this month, there was an extraordinary turnaround. On the day Supreme Court reopened after winter vacation, Verma drove to Rashtrapati Bhavan to recommend Punchhi. Cleared him, had he? Or had he no choice? No answer. The lawyers who had drawn up the charges were angry. Punchhi, himself, remained unapproachable.

After all this, a Chandigarh newspaper approached him through a friendly lawyer for an interview. Punchhi declined. He was, said the lawyer to the newspaper, high-minded about it. He was against publicity. Silence had won.

Is it to be rejoiced? Ask not that of Shanti Bhushan or Ram Jethmalani. Check with friends and well-wishers.

Who might they be?

There is V. Ramaswami of course, who was saved from impeachment by Narasimha Rao. Punchhi and Ramaswami came together to Supreme Court from the Punjab & Haryana High Court. Punchhi was present at the controversial audit of issue furniture and carpets at Ramaswami's Chandigarh home when the latter was moving to Supreme Court and allegedly instructed an auditor to attest that everything was in order.

Later, Punchhi insisted being on a Supreme Court Bench hearing the validity of impeachment proceedings against Ramaswami. Punchhi's extreme stoicism and silence since June 1997 may have been learnt from Ramaswami who left Supreme Court only when he retired.

Rao, too, must wish him well. Punchhi let him depose at Vigyan Bhavan and not at a lower court like Patiala House in the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha bribery scandal. Bhajan Lal would be pleased but Punchhi would think twice before welcoming him. He gave Punchhi two plots out of his discretionary quota that were returned immediately after a newspaper exposure. Deve Gowda, who seemed keen to make him Chief Justice superseding Verma, was there at his swearing-in for all to see. Nor would Kapil Sibal, his soldiest supporter in the Bar, lack in the celebrations.

Who *is* Chief Justice Punchhi? Ummm. Well...

Certainly, he is different.

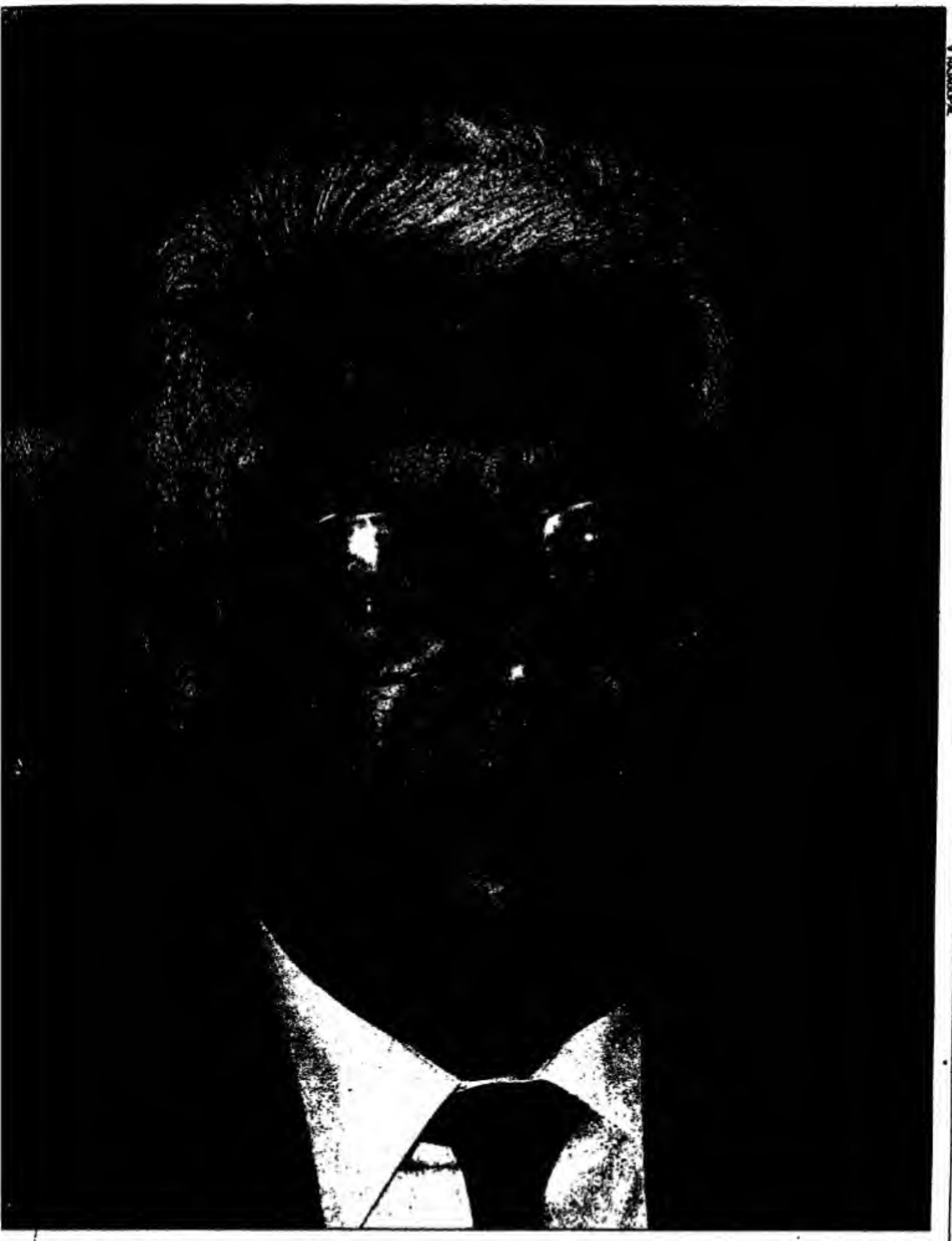
He wore a pistol to court trying cases against Punjab terrorists. Some policemen will happily accept him in their ranks there.

At a meet, he compared public interest litigations to shoes. If they were tight or loose, you couldn't walk, he observed. They had to fit to be comfortable. The argument is that since a Supreme Court judge — and now Chief Justice — said this, he couldn't be a heel. But PIL lawyers squirm at his unhealthy fascination for footwear.

Once in open court he declared he would refuse neurosurgery by a doctor from the quota list. He has similar conviction for out-of-court settlements but may be less expensive. In a case involving the son-in-law of that old scamster, Haridas Mundhra, he recommended compromise. Shanti Bhushan and others quickly proferred this as one more instance of his alleged corruption.

And, yes, he will have fewer run-ins with the executive. He could easily be the friendliest Chief Justice in years.

But ultimately, the elevation of Justice Punchhi shows how Supreme Court may suffer from its own caprice. Verma wrote the 1993 judgement giving primacy to Supreme Court in judicial appointments but was powerless to stall Punchhi if he was so keen. Punchhi opposed it insofar as rejecting the need for the Chief Justice to consult other judges in such placements. If Verma had the powers Punchhi wanted given, Punchhi may have had fewer reasons to be silent. •



V RAMOOPAL

TRADITION

In the name of

For the Ramnamis of Chattisgarh, devotion has a quaint way of expressing itself

Lord Ram was born some billion years ago, way back in *Treta* age. That's the popular Hindu belief. But in a small hamlet of Chattisgarh, yet another Ram had taken birth earlier in this century. This Ram was born out of rebellion and with him was born the mystic cult of Ramnamis.

The story can be traced back to caste-oppression. For ages, Hindu fundamentalists and Brahmins in particular barred the Dalits and the *Achoots* (untouchables) from entering the Ram temples. They were not even allowed to utter the name of Ram. Then, one day, the Harijans felt they had had enough. As a mark of protest, they got the name of Ram tattooed all over their body — even on the tongue. Now they could dare Brahmins "to come and take away Ram from us". For the devout followers of Ram this was a kind of poetic justice. For the word Ram actually meant omnipresent.

Decades after the Ramnamis rose in a quiet rebellion, the legend abides. And so does the practice, although in a somewhat modified form. Come winter and the Ramnamis get together on an auspicious day to celebrate the *Bade Bhajan ka mela*. This year the congregation was held in Khamaria, about 140 km away from Bilaspur district of Madhya Pradesh. Khamaria came alive with the resonance of *bhajans* sung in the name of Ram. The Ramnamis sang, danced and were quite exhausted by the time the celebrations were over.

Almost all the Ramnamis are above 60 years of age. They have tattoos all over their body. The next generation, many of who can't bear the pain of tattooing, has compromised with only two tattoos on the forehead. And their childr-en do not normally sport tattoos.

According to Sadhu Kartik Ram, the blind headpriest of the community, once there was a Ramnami who broke a needle into two halves, dipped in ink and swallowed them. "Let the needle scribble the name of Ram inside me."

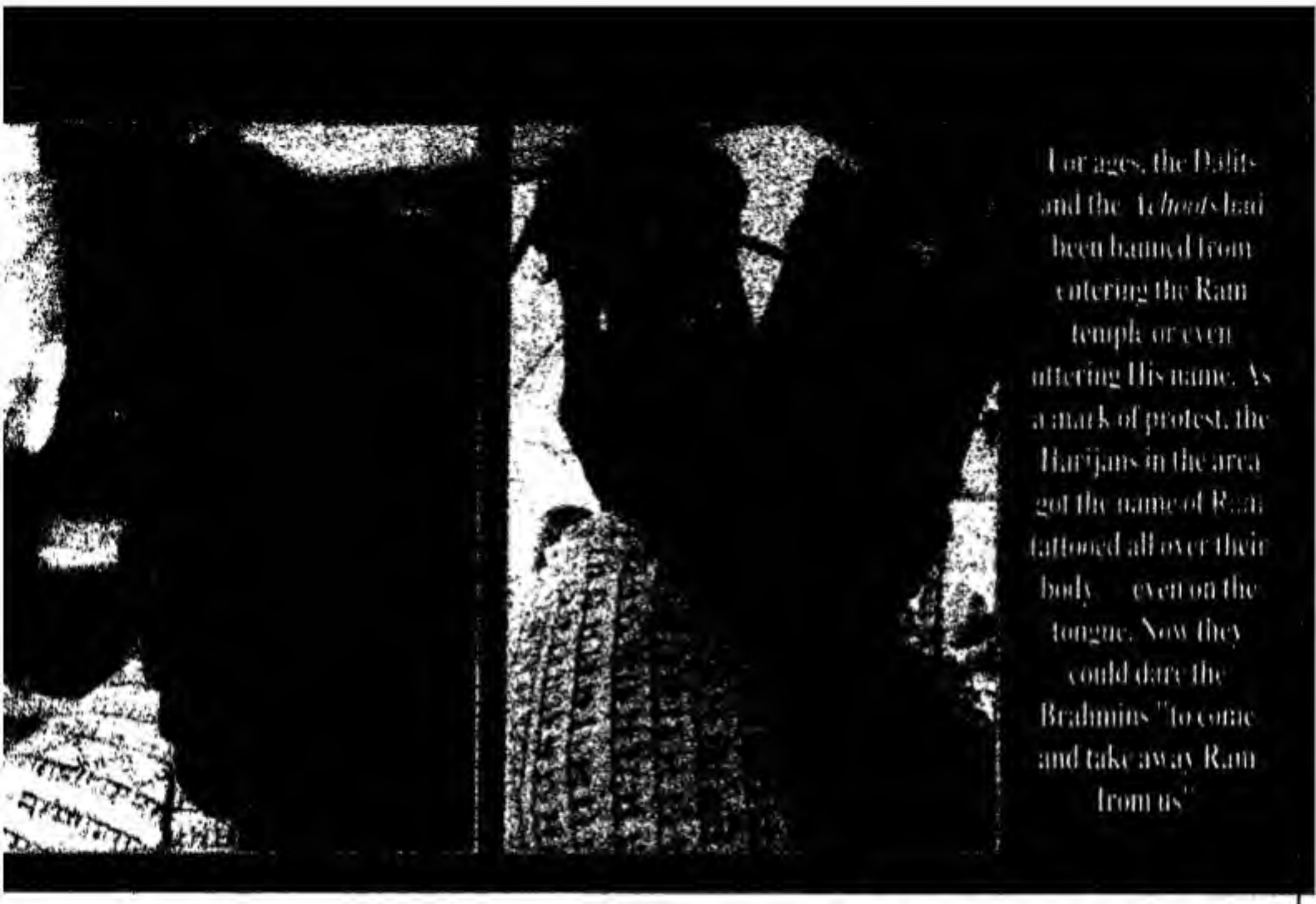
It took Ganga Ram, a 62-year-old Ramnami, 20 painful days to get the name of Ram tattooed all over his body. Ramdas, 70, and his wife Nanki Bai, 50, went through a similar painful experience. "I was muttering Ram when the tattooing was on. When the pain increased my lips moved faster and the voice was louder," reminisces Ramdas.

Vedram, son of Ganga Ram, has only two tattoos over his forehead. "It's the same thing whether you have two or 200," says he. "I would never have even a single one over my son's body."

"My Ram is not the son of Dashrath. He is not the one from Ayodhya," said Gangaram. "My Ram is my own. See he is all over my body. You can't take it away from me. Can you?" True. The Ramnamis don't worship the idol of Ram. But they do rever the Ramayana and *Ramcharitmanas* — books about the legend of Ram.

"Out of about 24,000 verses in the *Ramcharitmanas*, they sing about 400," says S. Anitha, a reserach scholar doing her Ph.D. on Ramnamis. "Some times they change the meaning, according to their belief."

Somewhere towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, one Parasram started mobilising Ramnamis. The Satnami movement against caste oppression was already on in Chattisgarh (Satnamis are also a Harijan sect who worship *Satyanam* i.e. truth), from which Parasram possibly took the cue. Parasram was the first in



For ages, the Dalits and the *Adivasis* had been banned from entering the Ram temple or even uttering His name. As a mark of protest, the Harijans in the area got the name of Ram tattooed all over their body — even on the tongue. Now they could dare the Brahmins "to come and take away Ram from us"

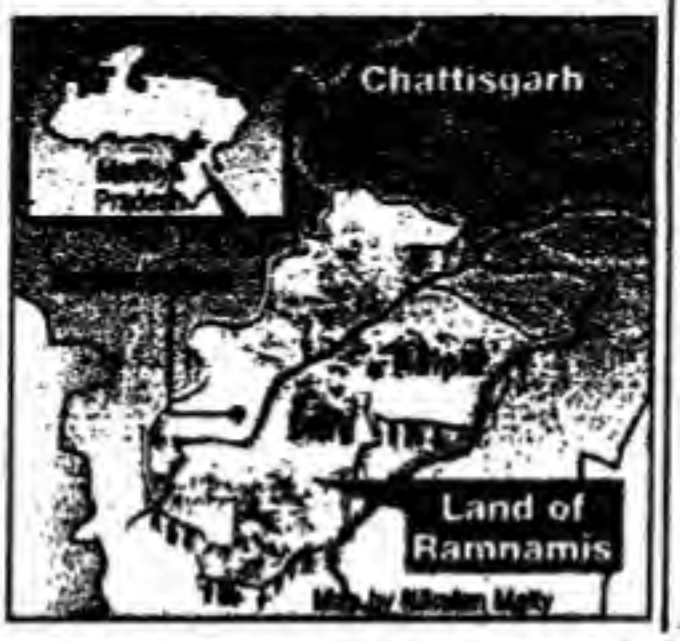
the community to have the name of Ram tattooed all over his body.

It won't be out of place to remember a historic court case in this context. Two backwards — Ratiram Chamar and Rasia — moved court in Raipur when the upper castes would not allow them to worship Ram, in the early years of the 20th century. Judge S.K. Mayor ruled in favour of the backwards. On 10 October, 1912 Ramnamis got organised under the Akhil Bhartiya Ramnami Mahasabha. The first *Bade Bhajan ka mela* was held in Pirda village of Bilaspur in 1911 to mark the occasion.

The *mela*, in its present avatar, starts with processions. This year the Ramnamis set out from village Arjuni in Bilaspur on 30 December. The procession went around different villages with more and more Ramnamis joining in. The group reached Khamaria on 8 January.

The village wore a festive look. Courtesy, blue flags provided by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Party supremo Kanshi Ram had his eye on the community for some time. In 1988 he is supposed to have told them to stop getting their bodies tattooed. "You can be recognised easily in public. Don't get even two [tattoos] over your forehead as the people will ridicule you," he said, allegedly. Although this is yet be confirmed, Kanshi Ram clearly wanted to win over the community which hasn't shown a liking for any political party whatsoever.

The *Bade Bhajan ka mela* was flagged off with *kalash yatra*. Women balancing pitchers over their heads marched to a concrete structure, called the *jaistambh* (pillar of victory), with Ram written all over it. The *nakh-shikh* Ramnamis (tattooed all over from head to toe) sported headgears made out of peacock feathers as they danced and sang. On reaching the *stambh* they would offer coconuts and go round it chanting the name of Ram. Here a copy of the *Ramayana* is kept and offerings are made to it. Later, they would exchange greetings and disperse in the *chandnis* (small tents with platic covers). The tents, food, fuel and other necessities are provided by the village head.



Bhajan sessions, discourses and dances to the tune of devotional songs are other attractions of the three-day *mela*.

The Ramnamis eagerly await this annual festival, which gives them an opportunity to meet each other. Otherwise, they live in remote pockets in Chattisgarh, mostly on either side of the Mahanadi river.

But there has been a rift among the Ramnamis in the last three-four years. Seperate *melas* are being held on either side of river Mahanadi. A sign of the changing times, perhaps.

The change is also apparent the way Ramnamis now prefer to carry an *odhni* (a long piece of cloth used as a shawl) with the name of Ram written all over it instead of tattooing their whole body. Which, they feel, does not make them any less devout than their forefathers — those who initiated the movement.

For even if the practice of tattooing may gradually vanish from their lives, the name of Ram never will. •

Deobroop Saxena/Bhopal

V RAJKOPAL

The inauguration ceremony: for the first time in 25 years the festival had private sponsors

Some bad, some excellent and mostly average — that's the way it was at the IFFI '98

Our FILMS

At the opening press conference which ritually kicks off the International Film Festival of India (IFFI), festival director Malti Sahai confessed candidly: "We have failed at marketing our films."

Marketing, in fact, has been a bad word at all previous festivals. The annual event has existed on a lofty plane where the accent is firmly on the exchange of cultural and artistic practices as seen through films. The exchange of cash in terms of films bought and sold came in a very poor second.

The mismanagement in organising the show reflected a nagging problem: the festival authorities were perennially cash-strapped. When the Directorate of Film Festivals (DFF) goes shopping on a budget which is laughable, all it can get is films from the basement, leading to the familiar carping about old second-rate movies making up the bulk of the festival.

This year, for the first time in the history of the 25-year-old event, there is private money. Said Sahai, who is in her fifth year as IFFI director: "It came in the last minute (barely a week before the fest opened) and it has saved our lives."

The presence of money was visible and unabashed. All the donors got their quid pro quo in the attendant publicity: huge banners of a cola giant festooned the venue, from the main Siri Fort I theatre to the makeshift tent which housed the film mart. The Ford Foundation which put in Rs 37 lakh got to print its name on the invites to the open forums and the seminars. A New Delhi-based marketing agency was given the right to sell tickets, and to sell air-time on the Doordarshan capsules on the IFFI as well.

The Delhi government offered Rs 1 crore. Chief minister Sahib Singh Verma got to make a speech on the opening day as also to share the dais with this year's lamp girl, Manisha Koirala. All shapes and sizes of *sarkari karamcharis* filled the theatres afterwards — in search of the elusive hot numbers.

Which brings us to the films. Almost till the last hour, no one at the directorate was willing to reveal details about the films. Among other reasons was a hold-up at the customs of arriving prints. For all the low-key build-up, however, the quality of the films was more or less the same as previous years — mostly average, leavened with some bad, and some excellent.

The twin highlights were, without doubt, the Sarajevo package (a clutch of films made on the war in Bosnia) and the largest retrospective of films by Andrez Wajda in the country. You only have to look at *The Perfect Circle* which tells

the moving story of two kids orphaned in the war, or *Welcome to Sarajevo* which is based on the experiences of a British reporter who gets emotionally involved with the war to realise how much war erases — families, happiness, life.

There were also some outstanding films by the acclaimed Iranian filmmaker Rakshan Bani Etemad, besides a focus on recent African cinema. Several works by Spanish celluloid maestro Carlos Saura — his latest film *Pajarico* opened the festival — were a major attraction.

As usual, the mainstream section showcased a number of last year's popular films. Subhash Ghai's *Pardes* opened the section, and the director spent time at the venue catching a bit of the Sylvester Stallone-De Niro-starrer, *Copland*, just like any other delegate.

The severely-truncated Panorama section (only 13 films were listed, out of which Kumar Shahani's *Char Adhyay* couldn't be shown because of a court injunction) offered up the weakest films in recent memory. Only a couple of films — Rituparno Ghosh's *Dahan* and Subhash Agarwal's *Rui Ka Bojh* saved it from total ignominy.

In all, there were well over a hundred films, spanning 35 countries. You got sandpaper eyes at the end of the day, but the hope of finding an unexpected gem propelled you back into the jam-packed auditoria. Nearly all the films in this section pulled the crowds, and not just those which carried mandatory flashes of nudity.

At the end of the ten-day jamboree, some of the questions which surface at the end of each festival do stare you in the face. The difference this year is that some of the answers are starting to take shape.

Is the IFFI finally beginning to come into its own?

It is an uncomfortable fact that the IFFI has been a festival long in search of an identity, but the expanded competition section (which included Asian entries, starting this year) should go a long way in defining the festival's nebulous character.

The fact that from now on New Delhi will almost certainly be the festival's permanent venue, will also help. The travelling circus it turned into every alternate year only added to the annual chaos.

Does it have funds to raise its own funds?

This year saw the beginning of self-sufficiency. That money has always been a contentious issue was obliquely referred to in information and broadcasting minister Jaipal Reddy's inaugural speech. He may not have sanctioned enough himself, but he did not stop Sahai from knocking on private doors.

Is it, in the end, worth all the sweat and tears, despite the sporadic glitches and gloom?

To that, a resounding yes. The IFFI is our only chance to access quality cinema from around the world. Imagine missing out on Krystoff Zanussi's latest (He was at hand to introduce his films which were scheduled at the last minute for a late showing. A show at 10.45 pm in the chill of New Delhi's January can deter the hardiest soul, but the theatre didn't have any empty seats). Or Jean Luc Godard's newest work *Forever Mozart*. Or Wong Kar Wai's superb *Happy Together*.

It does not bear thinking about. •

Shubhra Gupta/New Delhi

TARAPADA BANERJEE

DAHAN (Bengali)

LES PALMES DE M. SCHUTZ (French)

their FILMS

UNICORNIO (Argentinian)

THE OUTHOUSE (English)

SHOEMAKER (Canadian)

KAAL SANDHYA (Assamese)

FROM GODNA, WITH LOVE

Another artist has rediscoveredher roots. Arpana Caur is back with her exhibition of paintings after a long interval of four years, and this time she is smitten by the Godna art form, 'an ignored sister of the Madhubani form'.

Godna, unlike Madhubani, is not flamboyantand colourful — the colours, lines and contours are muted. And it is to Caur's credit that she has added a touch of verve and buoyancy to what would otherwise be flat and academic.

A self-confessed colour freak, Caur has used bright colours like reds, oranges and pinks in large, liberal dollops, rounding off her sketches in black and white Godna strokes. But how did she discover Godna? "Oh, around 20 years back a woman from Godna approached my grandmother and I discovered it in her trunk a couple of years back... and I was impressed."

And the impression it made on her is still fresh in her paintings.

Arpana Caur: memories of another spring

THE SPIRIT OF 18

Yes, 18 has been the operative number for him. His father Amjad Ali Khan's first album was cut when he was just 18. Then 18 proved lucky again when Amaan Ali Bangash launched his debut album at the same age as his father's.

But contrary to popular belief, the going has not been easy. "It is not always possible to live up to expectations people have of me just my being the son of such an illustrious father. There is always that inevitable comparison made." And was the sarod maestro as good a guru as a father? That was the difficult part — Amaan could not figure out when the guru gave up and the father took over.

But at the launch of the debut cassette by Navras Cassettes, it was the father who was in evidence — Amjad looked on dotingly while the son stole the limelight — for once.

Amjad and Amaan: winsome twosome

EIGHTY, BUT YOUNG

[redacted] Life throws up its own mavericks. Think about it: at 80, Russi Mody ought to be taking things easy. Instead, the former Tata Steel MD and chairman will be contesting the Lok Sabha elections from Jamshedpur as an Independent. Not that it doesn't make sense, because he has already scared the BJP into a frenzied search for someone to match his charisma.

Mody's manifesto? "I

Russi Mody: boardroom to politics

wish to contest the polls on a positive note," he says. "My slogan is 'job for every hand and water for every village in this tribal belt'." A touch of Quixote, you'd say? But that would be denigrating the man. There aren't many who can bounce back after the humiliating exit drama from Tata Steel. Mody has a plan. And there's steel in him.

RUBIES ARE FOREVER

[redacted] You have seen her wield the anchor's baton on numerous countdown shows. Now get ready to see her brandishing the cop's *lathi*.

The irrepressible, never-to-be-quiet Ruby Bhatia is putting on pancake in her debut performance in a serial on STAR TV. Essaying the role of a lady cop, Bhatia tries hard to unravel a mystery but has to seek aid from a convict (played by Aly Khan, that oh, so serious! anchor for *Namaste India* on the now rechristened El TV)

Ruby Bhatia: new sheen

What follows is a tale of love and hate (what else?). And *Yeh Hai Raaz* is not surprisingly what the serial will be called. There sure are other things than titles to serials, and being the chatterbox Bhatia is, these are precisely the precious secrets she will find hard to keep.

WHISTLING-GENES!

[redacted] It must have something to do with DNA. Thirteen-year-old Shamim, the youngest referee in German football, is the son of Afsar Sattar who has been a referee in the German league for the past 19 years.

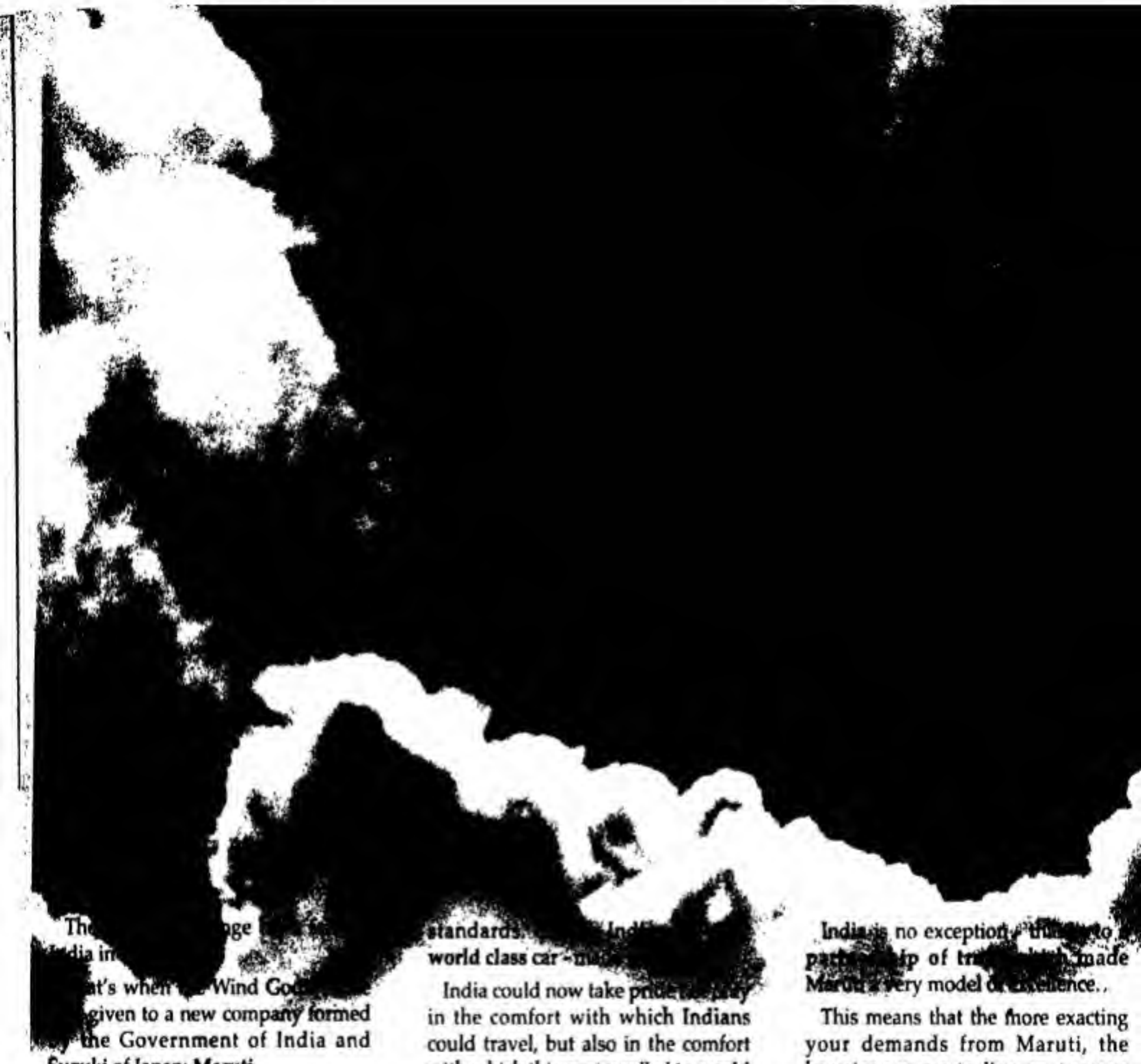
Last November, Afsar got the prize of his life from his son when Shamim passed the tough test for German referees much before the prescribed minimum age coming first among 80 candidates with a record score of 59.5 on a 60-point scale.

He dreams of more: refereeing in the Bundesliga when he turns 18, becoming an automobile engineer like his father, and earning fame as an ace mid-fielder. Shamim has been playing the game since he was 4, and now plays in the C-Youth League.

There's one danger: too much versatility could lead to early peaking and burn-out. Maybe, the boy just wants to be like his father.

Shamim with his dad: like father like son

PRADIP SAHYAL



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SMC/05/98

Face value

The pressure to look good is telling on the girl child

A ten-year-old looks through a popular glycerine soap and pleads, *"Pears, mujhe bhi Mummy jaisi sundar bana do na."*

Another little girl looks at her mother applying a popular brand of hair oil and wishes that she could have 'hair like Mummy'.

These TV ads were made at a time when dolling up her little girl was Mummy's prerogative and young girls yearned to look like Mummy. But Mummy was strict and felt simplicity should be the key to dressing during the growing-up years. Exceptions were made for family weddings, the only occasion on which little girls were allowed the liberty of applying a dash of lipstick and some colour on their cheeks.

But weddings apart, ten-to-14-year-old girls generally sported pigtails and had spots on the cheek. The only beauty products within reach were hair oil and cream. This was the time when girls were told to 'look and act their age'.

'That age' is already a thing of the past. Today, the sight of a carefree young girl, her dress all ruffled from playing, is hard to come by. It is obligatory to be well-turned-out — the permed, manicured and the hennaed are here to stay.

Hair-cuts are being lifted straight out of *Vogue* or *Vanity Fair*. Badminton rackets and sports gear have been replaced by dressing tables with a carefully chosen collection of lipsticks and other beauty paraphernalia. Dresses are usually bought a size too small. Lycra shirts and tights, girdles and gold braids are musts in every young hep woman's wardrobe. And, of course, there should be accessories to match. There's a whole new range of haute couture to pick and choose from — one which perhaps even the model Mummy on TV can't keep up with.

How do mothers view this shift from

healthy suntans to creamy facials in children so young? They are delighted. Well, mostly. Where mothers are not actually dragging their daughters to beauty parlours, they wouldn't mind their young darlings turning into prospective beauty queens. Even if it costs the child a good deal of sweat and tears before she comes anywhere near the coveted goal.

At a beauty parlour in Vasant Vihar, a 12-year-old daughter of one of Delhi's dime-a-dozen celebrities screams with pain. She is getting her stomach waxed — an excruciatingly painful process that even older women baulk at. Reason? "I am taking swimming lessons in school and I have to wear a swim-suit, you see," she says, completely oblivious of the absurdity of it all.

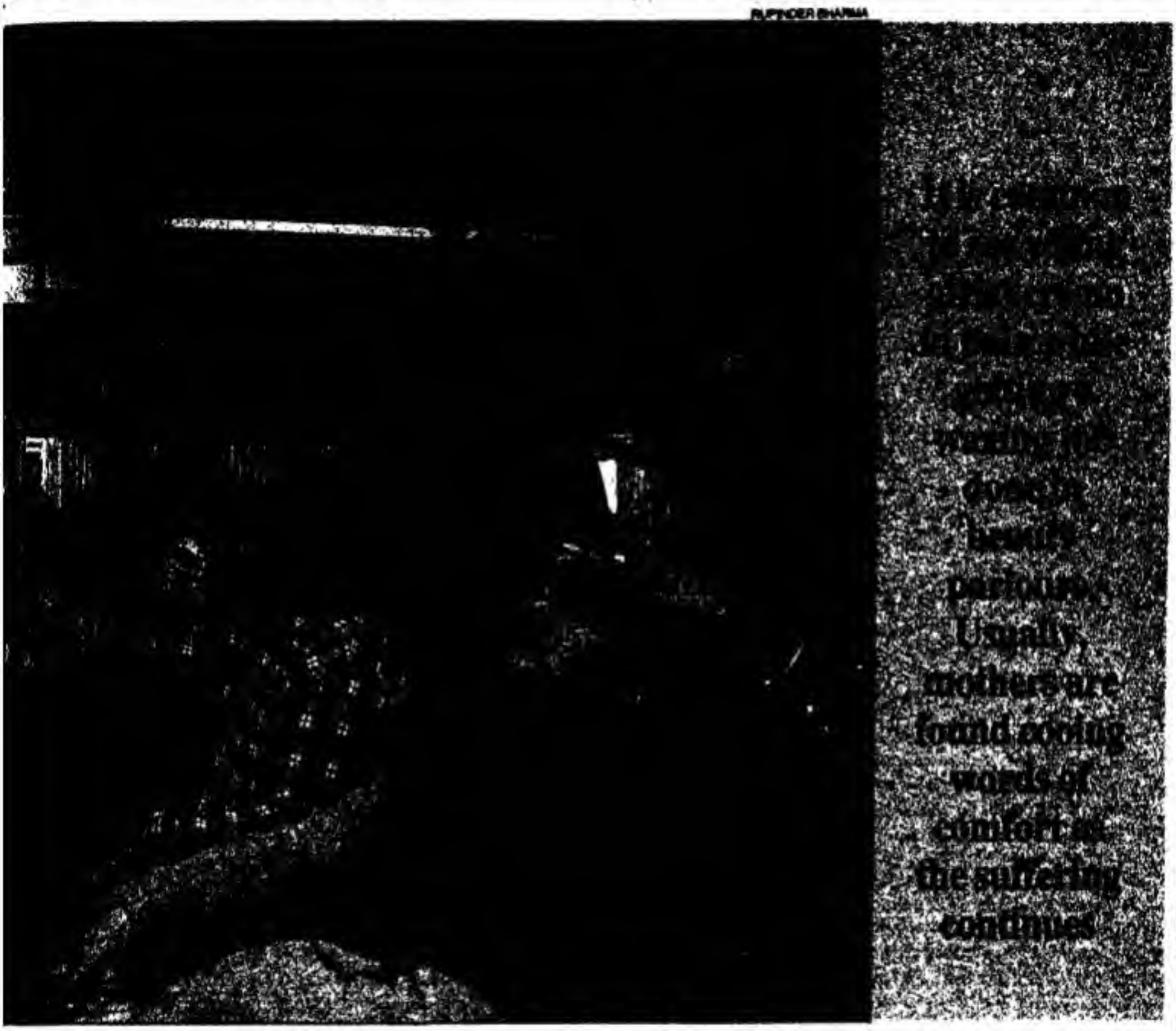
For the less adventurous, often

SITTING PRETTY

Beauty aids and accessories come at a price

- Lycra t-shirt and tights ..... Rs [illegible]
- Nail colour ..... Rs [illegible]
- Designer purse ..... Rs [illegible]
- A facial, waxing and hair cut ..... Rs [illegible]
- Footwear ..... Rs [illegible]
- Other accessories ..... Rs [illegible]

The prices are approximate and applicable to shops in [illegible]



mothers come along to lend moral support. One of the most common sights in a beauty parlour is of young girls screaming in pain while getting a waxing job done on some tender part of their bodies. Usually, mothers are seen cooing words of comfort as the suffering continues.

Says Geraldine, owner of a beauty parlour in Vasant Vihar, "At times, I am shocked at the enthusiasm shown by mothers who bring their little girls to the parlour. Very often they just come and tell me to give them the complete beauty treatment — waxing, facials and sometimes even bleaching."

Girls, as they say, will be girls. The desire to emulate one's mother is only natural. But while earlier mothers drew the line as to how much of cosmetic assistance was permissible, nowadays they have no qualms watching their daughters spending hours preening in front of the mirror. The aforementioned 12-year-old religiously visits the parlour with her mother every Sunday.

According to Sumati Ghosh, child counsellor, it's a question of vicarious wish-fulfilment. "A lot of women want to live through their growing-up years once again. They do this through their daughters. As a result, such women often go out of their way to buy those products or outfits which were not accessible to them or which they can no longer wear."

Agrees Achal Bhagat, psychiatrist with Apollo Hospitals. "Today's parents are going through a continuous struggle — that of attaining their goals through their children," he explains, adding, "They want to achieve everything, not willing to postpone their gratification. They live in a world of make-believe, which for them means looking beautiful and being a part of the hip crowd. This is the reason for parental pressure on children, especially on daughters to look good."

"There was this dark, plain 11-year-old whose mother was very attractive and sophisticated," recounts Ghosh. "The mother was too embarrassed to take her daughter out anywhere with her or bring her out in front of her friends for fear of ridicule. The daughter was under severe stress — nothing she wore or did was ever right. Her mother would constantly bombard her with beauty therapies and tips. As a result, the girl, unable to live up to her mother's expectations, withdrew into a shell and lost all self-confidence."

Even as mothers and their daughters run from pillar to post, searching for the 'in look', cosmetic manufacturers are having a field day. Biotique and Shahnaz have brought out a special range of products for children. The stress is on herbal products. A spokesperson at Biotique clarifies: "The skin of these young girls have a delicate PH factor which needs to be kept intact. That is why we have ensured that our products are absolutely safe for their skins. We have a special line for this age group — an all-purpose heatgerm cream and a body lotion called Morning Nectar. The lipsticks we have are herbal and absolutely safe."

Shahnaz Husain too has come out with a herbal range for kids. Particularly high on demand is 'uptan' — a paste made from milk and wheat husk, or milk and gram flour. The reason for using the product is, but naturally, to become fair.

Shops in both upmarket and not-so-upmarket areas are stocking up these products and there is no dearth of takers.

Every single beauty aid meant for adults, are being now marketed in their special versions targetted towards the young girl. Bags and purses, techno-colour sandals and clogs, figure-hugging pants and t-shirts, micro minis — everything comes in its miniature version.

"On an average, I have about 12 customers belonging to the age group of ten-to-14 years every day. The most popular items are fluoroscent nail polishes and see-through bags. Actually anything which the trendy women of today sports," says Sanjay, proprietor of a fashion boutique in Greater Kailash.

Unlike earlier times, nowadays mothers have no qualms watching their daughters spending hours preening in front of the mirror

RUPINDER SHARMA

With the large amount of pocket money these kids get, along with the no-holds-barred purchasing power, shopkeepers are not complaining.

But the obsession with beautyis not limited to wearing wacky and/or trendy outfits alone or applying the latest shade of nail enamel. Increasingly, young girls are going under the surgeon's scalpel, be it to touch up an asymmetrical nose or change one's visage entirely.

"It is a fact that girls and their mothers especially have become more aware of dental care," says Dr Sharda Arora, an orthodontist. "I do have young patients coming in to clean up their yellow teeth or set a crooked tooth right," he says. Once again, it's the big beauty obsession at work.

Things get worse when parents force young children to undergo plastic surgery for the slightest 'aberration' on their bodies. As a surgeon reveals, "Just yesterday I had a 15-year-old whose mother was insistent that I remove a mole under her eye. No amount of dissuasion or the girl's cries would make the mother budge."

Requests to modelling agencies for contracts are swelling. "We do have parents approaching us to get modelling assignments for their daughters," says Pranav of the Glitz Modelling Agency. "And there is some demand for them — for products like anti-pimple creams and toothpastes. The girls are merely required to look attractive and older. Make-up takes care of that."

As a blush-on replaces the suntan (even, or otherwise) and Sunday visits to the park are replaced by Sunday visits to the parlour, skin-deep beauty has become one of the top things to aspire after for the girl child. "You see, daughters are different. Girls have to look good. And if they don't keep pace with their generation, they will suffer from an inferiority complex," says Rina Pandey, a mother.

Billy Joel had once sung, "I love you just the way you are." Was it really so long ago? •

Pallavi Ghosh/New Delhi

RUPINDER SHARMA

Geraldine, beauty consultant

"Often mothers ask me to give their little daughters the complete beauty treatment — waxing, facials and even bleaching"

The rift widens

Producer R.V. Pandit accuses director Kalpana Lajmi of siphoning off funds

When director Kalpana Lajmi named her film *Darmiyaan* (rift), little did she know that it would be creating one — between herself and the film's producer, R.V. Pandit. And the rift seems to be widening.

The initial differences have now snowballed into an open war with both spewing venom against each other in public. "I'll drag Lajmi to court and see to it that she goes to jail," fumed Pandit, addressing journalists at a press meet. "I have enough evidence to prove that she was siphoning off funds worth crores of rupees under the pretext of escalating budget during the filming of *Darmiyaan*."

Not to be outdone, Lajmi performed a similar exercise few days later. She dismissed Pandit's charges as "slanderous, false and defamatory amounting to character assassination". "I won't be cowed down by his threats," reiterated Lajmi. "If he drags me to court on charges of misappropriation of funds, I'll file a defamation case against him."

As the story goes, *Darmiyaan* was to be co-produced by National Film Development Corproation (NFDC) and Pandit's own Pan Pictures for Rs 70 lakh. However, NFDC backed out from the project when the total budget shot up to Rs 1.37 crore, leaving Pandit as the sole financier. "Even before the actual shooting of the film had commenced, Lajmi informed me about a further raise in the budget to Rs 1.84 crore . She insisted that this was the final budget as all the contingencies had been taken care of and accounted for," informed Pandit.

By January 1997, 90 per cent of the film was complete. But the budget was raised to Rs 2.51 crore. Pandit claims that it was only when he asked Lajmi not to 'blackmail' him did she reduce it to Rs 2.37 crore. Twentyeight days later, after the shooting was completed, Lajmi presented him with another revised budget, this time of Rs 3.27 crore.

"I knew she was cheating me but I could not stop the film midway. I played her way all along," says Pandit. "Now with well-documented evidence, I will bring her to book." Pandit, who is the producer of seven films including the critically-acclaimed *Maachis* and *Train to Pakistan*, is known in the film and political circles as a clean man. He always makes his payments in cheques and says it is his mission to pull the film industry out of the quagmire of unaccounted money and unscrupulous people. His present battle with Lajmi, he says, is only a part of that larger crusade.

Kalpana Lajmi: "A film's budget is never final"

Recently, Pandit took the management of Eros Theatre to court for trying to sabotage the run of *Darmiyaan*. "They are driving away our audience by not providing proper air-conditioning facilities in the cinema hall," he says. "Who would want to spend Rs 75 to watch a movie in sweltering heat?"

Lajmi on other hand, maintains that she is being made a scapegoat by Pandit so that he can avoid paying up his outstanding bills. "A film's budget is never final. The escalation Pandit is talking about occurred over the span of three years during which the film's production costs more than doubled. In fact, it was he who wanted me to increase the production value of the film and didn't object to having three songs in the movie," says Lajmi, defending herself. Her only fault, she says, was her inability to obtain a more realistic and correct budget from the production team at the very outset.

A still from *Darmiyaan*: the budget rose from Rs 70 lakh to Rs 3.27 crore

"Pandit has always used abusive language with me in presence of his staff and my unit. He even threatened me with dire consequences," revealed Lajmi at the press meet. "He told me he would engineer income-tax-raids on me."

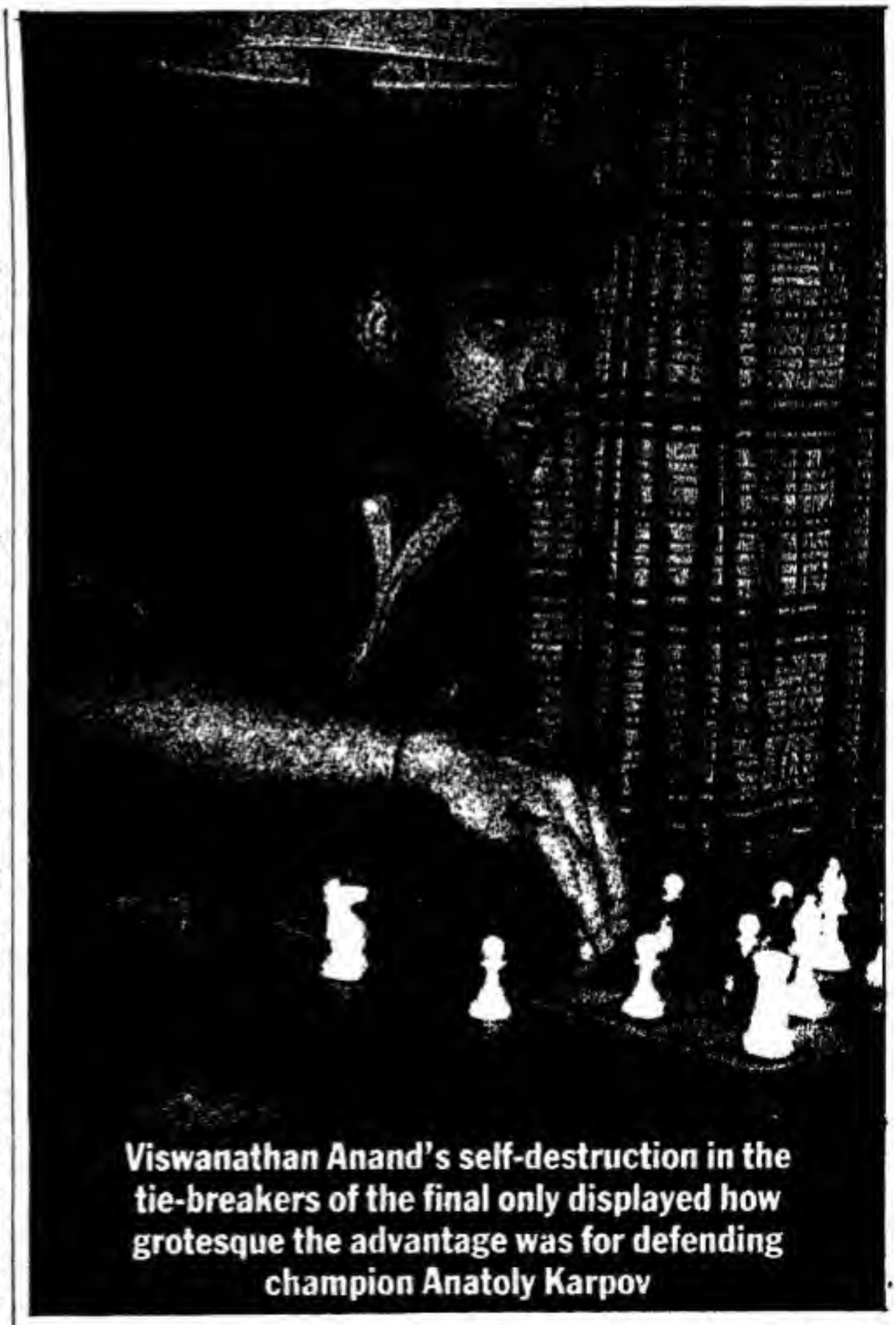
Lajmi feels her denial to incorporate Pandit's suggestions in the film could have helped aggravate matters. "I have acted on several of his suggestions at various times as long as it did not interfere with the storyline. However, in the final editing stages, I refused outright to entertain some of his ideas as they called for major changes on the technical and conceptual level of the film."

Now with Pandit keen on initiating legal proceedings against Lajmi, the verbal duel is likely to see a shift in venue. As for the final verdict, watch this space. •

Kanjal Walia/Bombay

The Uncrowned

Viswanathan Anand loses the World Chess Championship, but wins all the kudos



Viswanathan Anand's self-destruction in the tie-breakers of the final only displayed how grotesque the advantage was for defending champion Anatoly Karpov

What does making chess more like tennis or football mean? Does it mean the world's best chess players are to be seen in white shorts and T-shirts hanging around with Martina Hingis? Or does it mean that they will entertain people blitzing away some blunderful chess?

Well for that you can visit your local chess club and see them in plenty, and if you put in a little more money than what you spend on your weekly essentials, they will keep up the show for you all night. Maybe the big names doing it is more fun — big guys making titanic fools of themselves is always more interesting — but would you really dare to call it the World Chess Championship? Whoever does, FIDE certainly did. And what did they achieve out of it? More loss of credibility simply.

The FIDE title, since the defection of Gary Kasparov in 1993, has been suffering from a lack of credibility. So the whole point of the introduction of the new knockout format was to bring Kasparov back and do away with the question of credibility. That was not achieved, and that it was not to be achieved was clear months before the event commenced for Kasparov refused to play. But what really worsened matters was the way the title was won, or actually lost.

Viswanathan Anand's self-destruction in the tie-breakers of the final only displayed how grotesque the advantage was for defending champion Anatoly Karpov to be seeded to the finals. As it was, Karpov was guaranteed half-a-million dollars, and took away one million and the world title along with it for one week's play. It is doubtful how many in the world could have resisted such an offer, but it cost Karpov a lot of credibility with his fellow professionals.

It is no new thing fo Karpov: a question of credibility has always hung over his world title ever since he won it by default in 1975 when Bobby Fischer refused to defend it. He could have, however, enhanced his reputation this time — but doubtful if he could have won the title then — by sacrificing the advantage of being seeded to the finals and voluntarily starting at round 2 or 3.

But such a decision would probably have made a lot of difference to the final

King

result. The fact that Anand took the final to the tie-breakers even with the fatigue of playing without rest three weeks before, gives an idea of what damage he could have inflicted if he were given some rest, or if Karpov had not been totally rested.

Anand's comment, "I might have lost, but I don't recognise Anatoly Karpov as the world champion," reflects the general impression that the conditions for the Challenger were so strongly unfavourable that the result cannot be taken seriously.

Karpov once said, if you miss the world championship you miss it, and life continues without it. For Anand, missing the title this time does not seem to mean much, albeit winning it would have patently meant a lot. He says he fancies remembering this as winning one of the strongest events of all time. Winning the world chess title along with it would have been more than a complement: he would have been a world champion in his own rights.

The knockout format demanded a lot of readjustments in many respects: that the time-controls were different, the matches were too short, and the tie-breakers were composed of rapid play-offs and blitz games are but toname afew, but what was by far most desperate was the unremitting nature of the contest due to its tight schedule.

Anand played as many as 31 games in about four weeks' time, which for any level of chess is desperately tiring. Yet Anand managed to beat the format, and was one of the few to have managed to do so. Many players of nearly equal strength like Vassily Ivanchuk, Vaselin Topalov, Valery Salov and Judith Polgar were eliminated by relatively lesser adversaries in the very early rounds merely because they could not adapt their playing styles to the demanding nature of the contest.

But Anand, though beginning with some hiccups, showed he knew the mantra of survival. Quite evidently that was why he was so widely held to be the most deserving to win the title, and even in spite of his loss in the finals, his reception at the closing ceremony was noticeably warm while that for Karpov was much cooler.

This format requires of a player to be a downright opportunist, play practical chess, wait for your opponent to make mistakes, and the psychology of a good wicket-keeper or an experienced shoplifter. It was also important to carefully avoid being very predictable: so Anand was seen often going out of his way to keep his opponents guessing. Sometimes he was in trouble, and some invisible hand of God saved him, but mostly he was successful. It was in general very precarious — it seemed they were wearing teflon shoes and walking on a floor made of banana spills, but the end result showed the toughest can survive provided he can adapt his style to the system.

"I might have lost, but I don't recognise Anatoly Karpov (right) as the world champion," said Anand

Yet it does not probably qualify for a world championship in the truest sense because of the short length of matches and the exhausting one-month schedule.

Firstly, the matches are too short to be decided in regulation-time games. So the tie-breakers have to be introduced frequently. Rapid play-offs and blitz games and regulation time-games are as different as cheese and chalk and cannot be combined to determine a better player, just as sprint and marathon combined cannot decide a better runner. Secondly, playing continuously without adequate rest results in the players producing poor-quality games. This format with the large amount of money on the line promised excitement as it was to give clear winners and losers every other day, no long and dreary matches and the most committal cerebral bloodbaths, but instead produced a series of stupid games and looked more like the Christmas celebration of Bayern Munich Chess Club.

The professional players, including Karpov, unanimously want a reversal to the Candidates Tournaments. But at the same time, they are nolonger assceptical about this as before. Whatever the professional players might think, FIDE regards the experiment as a success. What certainly encourages them is the fact that Anand no longer opposes the format, and also Kramnik sees no objection to competing next time provided special advantages are not granted to the world champion. But that does not really fix the other problems facing FIDE, and *ipso facto* the sport as well.

Firstly, the source of money for the US$ 5 million prize fund is not clear and questions have already been raised. Kasparov said he would never play for such a large prize without knowing the direct source of money. Besides, the objective of including chess in the Olympic remains unaccomplished. Juan Antonio Samaranch said at the closing ceremony in Lausanne that the way was clear for chess to appear in the Olympics provided there was "unity". •

Aniek Paul/Calcutta

While other couples are being rent asunder by everything from another woman/man to career troubles, Akshay and Raveena's off-again-on-again affair continues to lurch from crisis to crisis.

Barely had the pair got together in the post-Sunny phase in the aftermath of Raveena's bout with meningitis than Nipunika, the girl that Akshay was supposedly engageded to, tore them apart. But all those misunderstandings are now, apparently, a thing of the past. Raveena and Akshay are once again doing a pretty good impression of being joined at the hip.

How long this phase will last, however, is anybody's guess.

RAVEENA TANDON

AKSHAY KUMAR

Love may make the *Duniya* go round — but not if Raageshwari has anything to do with it. She has split with long-time boyfriend Sanjay Narang — the man behind such Bombay nightspots as Jazz by the Bay and Three Flights Up.

Raageshwari, or Rags as she is popularly known, however, maintains that this split was the result of basic incompatibility and not because of any third person. She and Sanjay were just too different as people to be able to make a go of it. And despite their best efforts, the split was only a matter of time.

RAAGESHWARI

Yet another case of love gone sour is that of Suman Ranganathan and Rahul Roy. The couple who were engaged to be married and were living together in the interim are now history. Suman have moved into her new flat and now makes a cosy twosome with Farhan, Javed Akhtar's son, cuddling up to him both in public and in private.

Rahul, on the other hand, still seems to be recovering from a broken heart and is rarely seen out in public. And even then, never with another girl.

We guess that means that in his case, it was true love.

SUMAN RANGANATHAN

So, it's finally all over for Mazhar Khan and Zeenat Aman. The two had been drifting apart for some time now, but have now formally divorced. But for the moment they are still living together, because Mazhar is very ill and Zeenat doesn't want to leave him at this juncture.

But, given that they are still so close, why the divorce? Mazhar insists that is because he neglected Zeenat shamefully over the years, because of his preoccupation with his movie, *Gang*, which has been in the making for several years now.

Those in the know, however, insist that the real reason behind this estrangement is the fact that Zeenat has a new toy boy, whom she has installed in her flat. •

With the militants on the warpath, public resentment on the rise, and the elections round the corner, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta is in an unenviable position today

STATE OF TURMOIL

A blood-splattered Bihu, repeated ULFA strikes, and serious charges of human rights violations add to the Mahanta administration's problems

While the rest of Assam was busy celebrating 'Bhogali Bihu', death came calling at the No. 2 Kekerikuchi village under Rangia police station of Kamrup district on 13 January. Late that auspicious evening, residents of the Rangia Circle (an area of 144 sq.kms, comprising nearly a hundred villages) had assembled to prepare the auspicious 'Uruka' feast.

But the traditional Bihu feast had not yet begun, when a group of 30-odd gunmen descended on the spot and opened indiscrimate fire. Suspected ultras of the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) and the Bengali Tiger Force (BTF) sprayed the gathering with bullets. Fifteen people, including two children, died on the spot. Several others were injured, two of whom died soon after, pushing the death toll up to 17. On 15 January, some 12,000 people attended the funeral of the victims on the grounds of Kekerikuchi L.P. School. Of the 17 killed, nine belonged to one family, the Kalitas. A pall of gloom has descended over the entire area, in the aftermath of the blood-splattered Bihu.

The No.2 Kekerikuchi village has a unique history, a distinctive character. It was set up by some poor peasants who migrated from Borbhag area, in Nalbari district, way back in 1949-50. Since then, the people of this village have co-existed with the Bodos and Bengali Hindu and Muslim families of the area. So, this sudden attack — the first time that Bodo militants have targeted an 'Assamese' village — came like a bolt from the blue.

While some put down the 13 January killings to the BLTF's ethnic-cleansing drive, other informed sources claim that it was the result of rivalries among militants outfits like the ULFA and the BLTF. According to Prabin Kalita, the secretary of the Dwarkuchi Anchalik Committee of the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) and a cousin of victim Dwipen Kalita, the killings were the "handiwork of some politically-frustrated elements".

Dwipen Kalita, a former president of the Baidyagarh Anchalik Students Union of the AASU, was an adviser of the leading students' organisation till his murder. Among those killed was Lipika Kalita, the sister of a hardcore ULFA militant, Sankar Kalita, now in detention under the NSA.

Nearly all political parties and students' organisations have condemned

D for Dispute

The foreigners' issue takes a twist in Assam

On 9 December, 1997, the voters list was published in Assam. It was a list with a difference. Some 3.67 lakh voters had a curious hand-marked sign prefixed and the letter 'D' suffixed to their names. A footnote on every page of the electoral rolls simply said: 'D=Disputed/Doubtful'.

Those in the D-zone were, apparently, those who had failed to provide any proof of their citizenship to the enumerators engaged in the intensive revision of the electoral roll.

Amidst growing uncertainty about the rights of these

Citizens scan the voters' list in Guwahati: identity crisis

'voters', the political battle-lines were clearly drawn. AASU and Co. were adamant that these "foreigners" be kept out of the electoral process. The ruling AGP was keeping its fingers crossed and hoping for just such an outcome.

But the United Minorities Front (UMF) not only took up the cause of all those who had the 'D' sword dangling above their heads, but also the "substantial number of bonafide voters belonging to religious and linguistic minority communities" not included in the list at all.

On 26 December, 1997, the UMF despatched a memorandum to the Election Commission (EC) requesting it to: i) "make a Special Revision of Assam Voter List before the ensuing elections so that all those bonafide citizens whose names were not included in the final Voter List be included in the List enabling them to cast their Votes in the ensuing elections"; ii) "delete 'D' from the final list and allow those 'D' marked Voters to cast their votes in the ensuing election". The UMF memorandum further stated that "such action is nothing but (an) effort to appease those forces who used to raise the bogey of foreigners at the time of the preparation of Voter List to create a new political equation in terms of capturing power".

On 5 January, word of a directive from Nirvachan Sadan, New Delhi, filtered into the political corridors of Dispur: the EC had decided not to give the 3.67 lakh people in question the benefit of doubt. They were to be debarred from voting. In effect, the 'D-people' were being labelled 'the nowhere people', at least for the time being.

The reactions to this ruling were, understandably, diverse. The AASU leaders were most excited; the AGP camp wore a relieved look; and there were howls of protest from the UMF, the Congress, and other allied quarters.

"This is a case of systematic 'D'iscrimination against Bengali-speaking Hindus and Muslims," declared UMF secretary-general Hafiz Rashid Ahmed Choudhury. "Once a voter list is published, all the names appearing in it must be treated as bonafide voters. Under no circumstances can some of them be termed doubtful 'by hand' and denied their fundamental right to franchise. This is unconstitutional," adds Choudhury.

The UMF is ready to move court against the EC's "arbitrary order". "We will be pleading for a stay against the EC order to enable all those who figure in the final list to participate in the polls," says Choudhury.

The All Assam Minority Students Union (AAMSU), referred to it is as "a new method of harassing genuine citizens" and demanded its immediate withdrawal.

Tarun Gogoi, state Congress president, termed the move "most unfortunate". "This will deprive more than three lakh citizens of India from exercising their right to vote. The EC cannot be blamed, but it is the culmination of a politically motivated move by the state government," alleged Gogoi.

The AASU camp is, of course, all praise for the EC directive. "The Election Commission has shown sensibility in bringing some relief to the people of Assam," feels AASU president Sarbananda Sonowal. "But this is just a temporary measure, not a permanent solution to the most important problem facing the state," he asserts.

According to the AASU, the fact that those marked 'D' have found their way into the list means that they have been given the right to stake their claim as legitimate citizens of the state. "The EC has taken the first step, but if the Government of India and the state government are not alert to the foreigners' problem, it will affect the integrity of Assam and the sovereignty of the nation," warns the AASU president.

For Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, too, the EC's decision to debar the 'D' lot provides "temporary relief". "There is some good news," was the Assam CM's characteristically understated line, while conveying the 'news' to some fellow AGP men.

This is sure to earn Mahanta some vital Brownie points and could pave the path for a rapprochement between the beleaguered Assam CM and "his own people". The AASU leadership has gone palpably soft on the AGP leadership since the electoral roll issue took a turn.

So, if he plays his cards right, the foreigners' issue could help Prafulla Mahanta revive some old ties and forge some new ones. It could give him some breathing space, some much-needed room to manoeuvre. ●

the killings. The All Kamrup Students Union of the AASU, which organised a peace procession in collaboration with the All Rangia Sub-Divisional Students Union, has appealed to the government and militant outfits to shun the path of violence and resolve all problems through negotiations.

The CPI(M) and AGP were quick to call for a 12-hour Rangia *bandh*. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) president, Tarun Gogoi, decried the killings and blasted the AGP government for "doing nothing to protect the lives and properties of the people at large".

The Kekerikuchi killings have simply added to the woes of chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. The CM said that the government had definite information about the involvement of the BLTF and BTF in the massacre.

Mahanta already has his hands full with the LoC scam case, and the renewed threat of the ULFA. On 11 January, ULFA militants attacked IGP Sankar Barua in Guwahati. While Barua survived, Lt-Col. Anil Trikha fell to the bullets of the ultras on 14 January, in the heart of Guwahati.

With the militants sounding the battle-cry, the state administration, too, has decided to go on the offensive. The Unified Command structure has swung into action in Guwahati, sparking off one controversy after the other.

The government's seemingly misdirected ire fell on four unsuspecting Doordarshan officials. On the night of 15 January, deputy director (news) Hiteshwar Medhi, assistant news editors Pratap Bardoloi and Romani Malakar, and news producer Deben Tomuly, were picked up from their respective houses. They were accused of "inciting communal passion" through their news coverage of the Kekerikuchi massacre the previous evening. They were kept in the Gitanagar police station that night.

The four officials were later granted bail by a chief judicial magistrate (CJM). The deputy director general of DD, P.K. Singson, moved the bail petition on behalf of his subordinates. The police's request to keep the 'accused' in custody for 14 days was turned down by the CJM.

The arrest of the DD personnel was widely condemned. All staff members of the Guwahati Doordarshan and the National Federation of Information and Broadcasting Employees have come out strongly against the arrest. At a meeting of city-based journalists at the Guwahati Press Club on 16 January, the scribes decided to boycott all functions, press releases, etc., of the government and the ruling four-party alliance for three days.

The state units of the Congress, the CPI(M) and the BJP, the AASU, the All Guwahati Students Union, the All Assam Lawyers Association, many political leaders, intellectuals and human rights' bodies have criticised the state administration's high-handedness.

A prime target of the Mahanta administration today is the Surrendered-ULFA (SULFA). It comprises the ULFA cadres who had come overground amidst much fanfare during the Hiteswar Saikia-led Congress regime. In a swift operation on 17 January, more than 24 SULFA members were rounded up. While 22 were set free after preliminary interrogation, Munin Nobis, former ULFA 'foreign secretary', and Dipak Das were kept in custody.

MANZAR ALAM

An AASU demonstration: opposition to the Unified Command

The Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti (MASS), a human rights organisation of Assam, is also in the government's line of fire. MASS came into media limelight following the arrest (and subsequent release) of its president Ajit Bhuiyan and activist Asish Gupta. The present AGP regime seems to have targeted MASS as its enemy number two, after the ULFA.

Three civil rights bodies from different parts of India recently sent a fact-finding team to Assam to probe the allegations of harassment of MASS activists. The team comprised K. Balagopal of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, Harish Dhawan of the People's Union for Democratic Rights, New Delhi, and Sujato Bhadra and Partha Sinha of the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights, West Bengal.

The report of the fact-finding mission reveals that Bhuiyan and Gupta are not the only MASS members to face persecution. At least 12 office-bearers of MASS have been arrested since August last year.

Cases against these activists range from murder to distribution of 'seditious' literature. Lachit Bordoloi, Ranjit Saikia and Ganesh Bordoloi have been charged with issuing a leaflet on behalf of the Nagaon district committee of MASS stressing on the right to self-determination. This "cannot by any stretch of imagination be called a seditious act", the report points out.

As for the group's ULFA links, the evidence produced constitute letters claimed to have been seized by the police from militants having references to MASS. According to the team, "At this rate, anybody whom the ULFA may wish to discuss about can be charged..."

The fact-finding team has called for stopping the abuse of the NSA and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act against journalists and human rights activists in Assam. •

Dilip Chandan/Guwahati and Nilanjan Dutta/Calcutta

Lonely lady

Lakshmi Parvathi's tall claim leaves the BJP fretting

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) needs her and she needs the BJP. Lakshmi Parvathi, N.T. Rama Rao's (NTR) second wife and widow, has the saffron brigade behind her, but whether their backing will help her party, NTR-TDP, win a few seats is an open question. As the day of polling draws near, Parvathi finds herself being deserted by many of her aides. And with few friends left this time round, Parvathi might sink forever without the BJP's support. Yet, an injudicious statement she made recently almost wrecked the crucial alliance.

Slightly over 40, Parvathi, a *Hari Katha* singer before she walked into NTR's life, has always been a little tactless in matters of politics and administration. When NTR was the chief minister, she had shot her mouth off, saying, "I am incidental in allocating the finance portfolio to Chandrababu Naidu." The remark left Naidu sulking, and being an artful manipulator, he soon split the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), ousted NTR from leadership, and left Parvathi hopelessly powerless.

Last fortnight, Parvathi very nearly committed political harakiri by making a unilateral declaration on seat sharing. She announced that the BJP had conceded, in principle, 14 seats and that negotiations were on regarding the others. As far as the BJP was concerned, no decision had yet been reached and the party felt the announcement was premature.

Of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in the state, Parvathi was demanding 22 for her NTR-TDP, a number the BJP thought was unreasonable. Agitated BJP leaders M. Venkaiah Naidu and L.K. Advani were furious, suggesting a go-it-alone line. But as SUNDAY went to press, Atal Behari Vajpayee was still working at a solution, and it looked as though the BJP was ready to offer ten.

Parvathi was fortunate that the BJP chose to keep negotiations alive. The show of magnanimity was, however, inspired not so much by any concern for Parvathi's political future as by the BJP's calculated self-interest. The NTR-TDP is believed to command around 10 per cent of the votes in Andhra Pradesh and this could help boost the BJP's chances in the state.

For the BJP, gains in the south are of vital importance. This time, it is badly in need of a few wins from the southern states to augment its haul in the north if it is to notch up a government-forming total. With this in view, the party has struck a deal with AIADMK chief Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu (despite all the corruption charges against her) and with Lakshmi Parvathi in Andhra Pradesh.

Interestingly, the BJP is banking on the widows of two former matinee idols, MGR and NTR, hoping that the women would be able to cash in on the lingering popularity of the two stars. But Parvathi's tantrums could seriously harm her own as well as her ally's interests.

So far, her strength has lain in rural areas, especially among women. The withdrawal of prohibition is believed to have adversely affected the TDP's following among them. They had once carried on a spirited anti-liquor campaign, forcing the state to concede their demand. But now that the government has uncorked the bottle again to mop up revenue from liquor trade, Andhra's rural women, battered by their drunken husbands, may choose to cast their ballots in favour of Parvathi.

Chandrababu Naidu: unfazed

Advani with Parvathi: will the alliance last?

In 1996, her party had secured 32 lakh or 10.16 per cent of the valid votes. The BJP had got 17 lakh or 5.6 per cent. Both parties are expecting that their combined strength would win them a few seats. In the last general election, both parties had drawn a blank.

But will Parvathi's following hold till the day of the poll, still a few weeks off? That remains unclear, but there are definite indications that her close aides are deserting her.

What could be worrying her is her loss of support even from some staunch NTR-loyalists who had once instigated her against Chandrababu Naidu. Chief

among them is former TDP home minister P. Indra, who has floated his own Telengana Party. MLA Gaddebabu Rao, once close to her, has also joined the TDP. Four of her legislators — Gali Muddikrishnam Naidu, Appaiah Dora Naicker and Madhusudhanachari — are on the verge of decamping.

Some of her influential friends in the film industry have also been alienated. Actor Rajashekhar, his wife Jeevitha, and comedian Babu Mohan had campaigned with her 18 months back, but have now parted ways. Babu Mohan has already gone over to the TDP and hopes to be nominated for the Amalapuram (reserved) constituency where he was defeated by the Congress in 1996. Other industry bigwigs such as Vijayshanthi and K. Raju have joined the BJP.

Yet, Parvathi was once called 'Ahrushta Devata' or Lady Luck by those around her. Today, she is shunned even by her secretaries. Her bad political management has not only distanced her from TDP members but also from the common people. And the Telugu media, which once praised her contribution to the TDP, seems only to spew vitriol at present.

With her dreams of defeating chief minister Chandrababu Naidu having been long shattered, Parvathi today is a lonely leader. And the coming polls could be her last chance of staying on in the political arena

With her dreams of defeating chief minister Chandrababu Naidu having been long shattered, Parvathi today is a lonely leader. The coming elections could be her last chance of staying on in the political arena. If her talks with the BJP break down and her party is obliterated in the polls, Lakshmi Parvathi may have to find a new profession, or go back to her old one. •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

ECHOES FROM

Bomdi La, a new township created by the border debacle, announces the beginning of the Monpa lifestyle. The smart timbered tourist bungalow was fully booked so I had to look in the bazaar for accommodation. I ended up in a small but fairly new Marwari-run hotel, my choice having been influenced by the presence of metal beds. I am afraid of wooden beds in the Himalaya since they are used by that most assiduous of all hill travellers, the itinerant bed bug. I can shut my eyes to the most desperate plumbing arrangements so long as the bed is made of metal. And so at Bomdi La I gave the bathroom a wide berth, saving up for a country-style outdoor crap on the morrow. One of the simplest pleasures unique to the motorcyclist is to be able to stop at will before a blinding panorama of snow peaks and choose a quiet patch of jungle to squat down in and evacuate to the glory of God. One of the best tips I can give a rider in such outlandish postures is to always carry a tin of moisturized pull-out paper napkins. (I learnt this upmarket solution from a princess of Jammu and Kashmir in the wilds of the Ladakh desert.)

I ate at a Tibetan restaurant in the small bazaar and was bowled over by the beauty and vivacity of the local women. Even more stunning was the way they scrubbed and shined their kitchen utensils. But for the passer-by it was confusing to know who was what. Was your host a Monpa, a Tibetan refugee, or a Nepali? While I was there slogans were being painted on houses by students apparently belonging to right-wing Hindu parties who had managed to inveigle their missionary influence under the guise of educational activity. The giveaway was the Cow Belt choice of abuse —'Chor,' 'sala' and 'Go home blackfaced,' the latter betraying Aryan obsessions that may prove suicidal for the long-term winning over of Mongol affections. One of the basic grouses of the north-easterner is that he is discriminated against in the rest of India because of his 'Chini' facial structure.

The bike was performing smoothly

and I was in no hurry to miss out on the gentle scenery that now unfolded between the two passes of Bomdi La and Se La, an area marked by several memorials to heroic Indian rearguard actions. 'The most crushing insult to the honour of these fighting men had been the withdrawal from the Se La without a fight, a retreat that turned into a rout. but the whole episode turns again on preparedness for the Himalayan terrain. How can any officer flown in from Delhi to a height of 14,000 ft be expected to take a rational decision? Like any successful mountaineering expedition, the Red Army could only score convincingly because they were fully acclimatized.

It began to rain as I wound up the last 15 km of the bald hill that had a road slashed out of its bleak and stony summit. Then the mist clamped down, necessitat-

THE HILLS

Bill Aitken scales the sleepy Himalayas

ing use of the headlight lest I collide with a convoy. I was freezing and miserable from the soaking and found no relief on cresting the Se La. A small lake, reduced by the grey of the blustery clouds to a dismal duck-pond, went by the name of Paradise. One could only salute the morale of the jawans posted at these killing heights and marvel at their optimism in calling their punishment bunkers 'Shangri La.'

One of the basic grouses of the north-easterner is that he is discriminated against in the rest of India because of his 'Chini' facial structure

As I spiralled down past the exposed tin huts of the heroic road gangs who keep the Se La open even in the depth of winter, the sun broke through. Far to the west, glinting gold, was the monastery of Tawang. But so involved were the windings of the road that it took me four hours to fetch up there. I stopped in Jang at a *dhaba* and chatted up its cheerful Nepali custodian. These friendly, attractive and efficient women

I ate at a Tibetan restaurant in the small bazaar and was bowled over by the beauty and vivacity of the local women. Even more stunning was the way they scrubbed and shined their kitchen utensils

may be found along the entire length of the Himalaya, cheerfully earning their livelihood and enjoying the blessings of every tired and hungry traveller.

Tawang at 10,000 ft was cold and windy and the tourist bungalow was still under construction. Luckily I found a place at a Nepali establishment where five beautiful sisters were in charge of the proceedings. The bazaar was modern and without much character, with shops and shoppers that revealed the curiously artificial colonizing atmosphere of Arunachal's new settlements. For a start, one saw no tribals since they all confine themselves to their villages in the interior where the cycle of life is based on close intercourse with nature. Only their student offspring can be found in the towns mouthing religious propaganda or political half-truths. In the firing line today are the Chakmas, displaced tribals from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. (They had once been trained at Chakrata but now find themselves out on a limb.) It is small wonder that the local politicians resent the shortsighted ploys of New Delhi's policy makers and are forced to reaffirm their mongol identity even if this means nodding in the direction of Beijing. I was astonished in one government bungalow (where tourists are given permission to spend the night since no infrastructure yet exists for their accommodation in smaller places) to see a portrait of what looked like Chairman Mao. It turned out to be a local lookalike leader. Pushers of the Aryan ideal ignore such clues at their peril.

I found Tawang monastery sumptuous even when cleared of its treasures while undergoing restoration. The Bhutanese artists replacing the moulded wall figures worked with the rare touch of fiery faith in their calling, a medieval

In the firing line today are the Chakmas, displaced tribals from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. It is small wonder that the local politicians resent the shortsighted ploys of New Delhi's policy makers

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virtue that gave the world its great cathedrals. Tawang gompa still gives off that mood of crafted devotion despite the use of Fevicol to stick on the mud representations of the Boddhisattvas. The monks were innocent of the significance of cash tips for showing me round and were genuinely surprised when I offered to compensate them for their time. Contrast this with the tourist-oriented monasteries of Ladakh with their entry tickets and extra fees for cameras. At Stok I had asked an old Lama what his duties were and he croaked, 'I am the ticket-master.'

Unfortunately I couldn't see the countryside around Tawang owing to a petrol shortage, something that the motorcyclist learns to live with in the mountains. I went to the district magistrate's office to get my permission extended as promised by Delhi and was not in the least surprised when the young man sought to avoid doing the brave thing, advising me instead to go to the capital, Itanagar. However, to get to Itanagar I would need a permit. I had found babudom's ultimate Catch 22. *I need permission to seek permission.* I had to join in these bureaucratic musical chairs with the mindlessness of their preceptors. The fact that such time-wasting tactics were cutting into my access to Arunachal would have met with their full approval. They didn't really want visitors in the first place and tourists had only come thanks to the insistence of the local politicians. I met one on my ride back to Tezpur just outside Tawang and his serene welcome to a complete stranger summed up the winning appeal of the Monpas. He was accompanied by a very senior Buddhist clergyman who was asked to bless the ritual sharing of food — a feast had been prepared for the surrounding villagers come to felicitate their local representative seeking re-election. On the shrine, to which the spiritual dignitary added a white ceremonial scarf, stood what seemed a symbolic row of nine green bottles. Their labels read 'XXX Bhutan Rum.' In no area does the Mongol differ more from the born-again Aryan than in his openly declared love of alcohol and pork. Not that the Aryan despises liquor — he only pretends not to like it. I never relished the full significance of Elia's essay on roast pig until I saw the pure joy it elicited on this trip.

Perhaps because the Indian army is free of the guilt that attaches to civilian drinking it is noticeable how much more lively and life affirming military traffic noticeboards seem after the bland warnings of the Public Works Department. In fact, border areas road signs are apt to turn witty where army writ supercedes that of the PWD. The latter will warn, 'Death is a five- letter word. So is speed,' while the army will put it more succinctly: 'Marry safety. Divorce speed.' In cantonments you may find Eros firmly behind the wheel: "Curves, pleasure gently measure. Come slowly darling.' Besides these public words, axioms and military love-talk, you can find in peninsular India a school of wayside doggerel: 'Overtakers provide jobs for undertakers' or 'On your right comes valley side. A little wobbling may mean suicide.' Thanks to the romantic nature of Urdu and the fact that much of India's transport scene is commandeered by Sikhs, the long-distance rider is never far from uplifting couplets painted on the tailboard of disappearing trucks. Alternatively, one can read 'Save water: Drink wine,' further evidence of public scorn at the ambiguity that surrounds official attitudes to drink. •

'Riding the Ranges: Travels on My Motorcycle' by Bill Aitken. Published by Penguin. Price Rs 250

NOT SELLIN

Students of the FTII, the premier film education centre of the country, resist a bid to 'privatise' the institute

A file picture of FTII students agitating in front of the institute

Even as officials of the Directorate of Film Festivals were busy adding last minute touches to the IFFI '98, a group of students from the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, quietly pitched their tents outside the festival venue at the Siri Fort auditorium. Three of them would be going on an indefinite hunger strike.

They were protesting against the conceptual proposals mooted by FTII director Dr Mohan Agashe. The proposals, they felt, were made with commercial interests in mind. Privatising the premier film education centre of the country went against the very purpose of the institute — to make 'alternate, low-budget, socially relevant' cinema.

They had the backing of several institutions — National School of Drama and Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute among them — and well-known film personalities from Bombay. In a letter to information and broadcasting minister Jaipal Reddy, they appealed that "demands made by the authorities should not be accepted without scrutinising the facts and the chronology of events which led to the demand of the zero semester". The letter further said that the periodic crisis at the institute is a result of ad-hocism because every new director and chairman wanted to bring about substantial changes to the entire structure of the institute.

"Dr Agashe's conceptual proposals (non-academic) are welcome," the letter stated. "But our concern is regarding academic matters." Agashe was asked to "commit himself to implementing the revised syllabus at the earliest rather than fall into the trap of his predecessors of indulging in ad-hocism." Kumar Shahani, Syed Mirza, Paresh Kamdar, Jaya Bachchan, Mani Kaul, Naushad, Amol and Chitra Palekar signed the letter.

Earlier musician Naushad wrote to Reddy, making a similar plea. "Reducing the course duration/content would be disastrous as a centre for excellence will be sacrificed on the altar of commercialism. Neither the government nor the industry can afford to take such a myopic view."

In a letter to students of the FTII, dated 29 December, veteran film-maker Kumar Shahani wrote: "The hurry and the scramble for generating funds from private sources, with profit-oriented education, will be counter-productive, not only for the aesthetic and technical properties and standards of cinema, but also, ultimately [they] will affect the possibilities of the survival of Indian cinema, whether commercial, artistic or middle-of-the-road ... It is not possible for a market to be so artificially and naively manipulated ..."

Delegates, artistes, teachers, students, filmmakers, actors and actresses visiting the festival came and expressed solidarity with the strikers. On 10 January, amidst all the paraphernalia for the festival's inauguration ceremony, Reddy had a marathon meeting with Mohan Agashe, student representatives, former FTII students and eminent film people like Kumar Shahani, Jaya Bachchan, Paresh Kamdar and Reena Mohan.

The result went in favour of the agitating students. Most of their demands were accepted. The strike was called off amidst speeches by student leaders and solidarity groups. And the film festival took off without slogans of protest from outside the gate jarring the proceedings.

But the bitterness remains. Many among the students feel this is just a momentary cease-fire. "The move to turn the FTII into an expensive private fiefdom by the Bombay film industry

G OUT

will again emerge. These sharks want to make money at any cost. But as long as we are there, we will give them a run for their money," said a final year cinematography student.

The crisis began when film-maker Mahesh Bhatt, chairman of the governing council, FTII, resigned last month. His contention was that the FTII should be closed down if it cannot fit into the market-system. In a controversial interview to a Sunday paper, Bhatt said, "The FTII is like a temple in a red light area." He further claimed that the institute is not fulfilling its aim — it is surviving on subsidy and giving nothing in return.

The conceptual proposals mooted by Dr Mohan Agashe were based on similar ideas. He wanted to 'academically' privatise the institute into some kind of a polytechnic with quick and highly expensive crash courses essentially geared towards the TV, video and corporate sector. It also envisaged use of lower end equipment (video) for training, strategies to make the institute financially self-sufficient and re-defining the fee structure in the light of the new economic policies.

Agashe's major concern was to brush up FTII's "poor public image". His contention was that the institute lacked in professional work culture and the will to assert its own power. He regretted its overdependence on the ministry of information and broadcasting and ignoring its TV wing. All this called for a radical restructuring of the administrative and academic set-up of the FTII. The immediate resolution of long-standing administrative problems regarding poor pay structure, pensionary benefits and disparity of grades of the staff, filling up of vacant posts, status of mess and canteen

Mohan Agashe, director, FTII: "The FTII has a poor public image and lacks professional work culture"

employees, restructuring of ad-hoc and contract appointments and extension of service of superannuated persons were also on his agenda.

The proposals, if implemented, would possibly hike the annual fee from Rs 3,500 (approximately) to a huge Rs 3 lakh. And 'self-sufficiency', felt those opposed to the idea, was only a metaphor for a sell-out to private sharks.

The revised syllabus, designed by current and former students, faculty members and well-known film people from different disciplines which was earlier passed by the institute's academic council, was opposed by Agashe, the governing council and a section of the faculty. The students found this blatantly undemocratic as the revised syllabus, apart from legitimising the three-year duration of most courses, sought to overhaul the aesthetic component of the training and add new inputs in film technology such as digitilisation and multi-media practicals.

In an institute where courses have been changed seven times in the last ten years and where there is a disproportionate balance between education and infrastructure, the revised syllabus aimed at providing a holistic structure to film education which found favour with the students.

Said Bindu, a student, "We have our own areas of specialisation. But someone doing camera should also be able to do sound, or direct a film. This is what we mean by integration."

"The FTII should strive to make creative, meaningful, . low-budget films," said Shammi Nanda, senior student. "We should take our inspiration from

Mahesh Bhatt, former chairman, FTII: "The FTII is like a temple in a red-light area"

the history of alternative genre of Indian and world cinema. If we also join the money-making rat race, then what is the use of studying here?"

But she can take heart for the students have won the first round, with a little help from the I&B minister. The zero semester move has been scrapped, the revised syllabus will be implemented, no fee hike is in the offing and nor will there be a cut in subsidies. And privatisation is not going to happen just yet. It will take a while for the FTII students and their supporters in the film world to decide whether or not to unconditionally accept the market as God in the days to come. •

Amit Sengupta/New Delhi

Friends in need

For Bangalore's distressed children, help is only a phone call away

Bangalore recently gave its children a precious gift — the promise of solving their problems. All that the distressed child will need to do is dial a number and ask for help. Any child in trouble — be it abuse or exploitation — and with nobody to turn to, now has the option of calling up a particular number. At the other end of the line, there will be someone waiting to give him a patient hearing. She'll listen to the problem, offer counselling and work out solutions wherever possible. The service is toll-free.

Thanks to Brinda Subramanian whose brainchild the scheme is. She is a trained social worker who worked with street children, child labourers and school children in the past. While closely interacting with children — the weakest and most vulnerable section of society — Brinda had begun to feel the need for a support service for them. "Since 1993, I had been pursuing the idea of setting up a service which would help in crisis intervention where children were concerned," explains Brinda.

Things began taking shape after she met L. Revannasiddiah, commissioner of police, Bangalore, in September last year. He liked Brinda's proposal to initiate a cell/ombudsmen to protect children. The police, he said, would provide the premises for the operation of this cell. On 30 December, 1997, the children's helpline, named Makkala Sahay Vani by a working child, became operational. It is open from 6 am to 8 pm on all days of the week, and efforts are on to make it a 24-hour service.

"This is the first time that the police have actively collaborated with NGOs and voluntary organisations to start such a helpline," says Brinda enthusiastically. The Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, runs a similar helpline meant for children, but this is the first time that a police force is backing such a venture.

It is getting an average of 70 calls a day. Right from day one. There has been a lot of publicity through reports in newspapers. A TV channel featured it in its daily news bulletin. And, informs Brinda, children have also come to know of it through word-of-mouth, in families and schools. But what about child labourers and street children? "They are being made aware of the service by the NGOS working with them," says Brinda.

K. VENKATESH

Counsellors listening to young callers: the scheme has active support from the police and the NGOs

One such NGO, Concerned for Working Children (CWC), is part of the core team that has been formed to ensure the effective working of the helpline. Kavita Ratna of CWC recounts how enthusiastic working children were about the scheme when they discussed the project with them. "In fact, they suggested ways of publicising the facility," says Ratna. "They told us that putting up posters next to those of films would help, as they would certainly get noticed."

There are all sorts of problems that children want solutions to. Brinda and her team of two volunteers have had callers wanting to know how to deal with parental pressure, the fear of exams, differences at school with a teacher and sexual abuse. With slum children and child labourers, they had to address problems of a different kind. They asked for shelter, jobs, medicines, and had complaints about non-payment of wages by employers. There were pleas to find them a place to study in peace, because a drunken and violent father often made it difficult to learn one's lessons at home.

"It is impossible to take follow-up action in all the cases," says Brinda, "given our scant infrastructure at the moment." But there is help coming their way, even from unexpected quarters. Individuals who offered donations, are contacted when a child asks for medicines or the money to pay her exam fees with. "The response from the public has been very encouraging," says Brinda.

Children who appear to be deeply disturbed and in need of long-term counselling are referred to Vishwas, an NGO which has been working with disturbed and suicidal people. In cases of children being denied wages by their employers, the police have intervened.

Young Shiva, who works in a bar, called up to say his friend, a worker in a nearby hotel, wasn't getting his wages. It paid. "I always wanted to help, but did not know how," says Shiva. Childline showed him the way. •

Lopamudra Bhattacharya/Bangalore

Pilgrims' progress

Millions descend on Haridwar to attend the century's last Kumbh Mela

Even before the first rays of the sun could pierce the dense fog in Haridwar on 14 January, lakhs of devout Hindus had gathered on the banks of the Ganga to mark the beginning of this century's last Kumbh Mela.

Men and women, young and old, accompanied by their little ones, converged at Har-ki-pauri — the holiest of holy places along the 2,000-km course of the river. A dip that day, they firmly believe, would wash away all their sins. Braving the chill and undaunted by the near-freezing waters, the devotees went down in the shallow channels in the river, specially created for bathing.

Amidst the well-lit bathing ghats and the colourfully decked up ancient temple on the river bank, all that could be heard in the wee hours of the morning were the chanting of *shlokas* from scriptures. *Pandas* did brisk business as the flow of people became stronger as the day wore on. After all, this auspicious day had come after 12 years. The last Kumbh in Haridwar was celebrated in 1986, when a stampede, killing 52, marred the festivities.

Though a dip in the Ganga is always auspicious, the one at Haridwar during Kumbh Mela is very special and even holier than that at the other three Kumbh sites in Allahabad, Ujjain and Nasik. These three places play host to the festivities every 12 years. And astrological calculations have pinpointed 11 auspicious days for bathing during the course of the three-and-a-half-month-long festival. The authorities are expecting between 20 and 60 lakh people to take the holy dip at Haridwar during these special days.

Chief mela officer J.P. Sharma -- the post is created for the festival — believes this Kumbh to be the most crowded of all. "Apart from the number of devotees, which has been increasing over the years, this Kumbh being the last of the century is bound to draw bigger crowds," he told SUNDAY. And after the first day's turnout, he observed, "You see, even on a lean day, we had more than 5 lakh people coming here. So you can well imagine what will it be like on the special days."

Devotees bathing at Kumbh Mela: elevating experience

No wonder, the authorities are spending sleepless nights. An all-time high of Rs 100 crore has been allocated to meet *mela* expenses. The *mela* area is now spread over 130 sq.km, thereby providing more space. New ghats have been created along the two banks of the Ganga, providing a bathing area of about three km on each side.

While 30 new bridges (permanent and temporary) have been erected across the river, more than 15,000 policemen have been deployed, point out officials. Moreover, the administration has arranged for a supply of 1.3 million litres of milk per day to meet the requirements.

Chief minister Kalyan Singh, who has taken a personal interest, has visited the place twice since preparations began last month. He took note of the allegation that the work carried out at the *mela* site by the state's public works department, under the patronage of Kalraj Mishra, was not up to the standards.

The CM has already hauled up some officials known to be "close" to Kalraj Mishra. Kalyan Singh also turned down the idea of giving "VIP status" to certain *mela* visitors. While UP ministers and top bureaucrats have been told to keep away from Haridwar on the crucial days, Kalyan has publicly appealed to ministers from the Centre and other states to "avoid" coming to Haridwar on such days.

Interestingly, the feeling shared by people of all hues after they have taken a dip in the waters is the same. While it was a "godly experience" for Naresh and his wife who came from a backward tribal area of Bihar, for Rita Dey, headmistress of a girls' school in Howrah, West Bengal, it was a "lifetime dream fulfilled". And while the holy dip left army subedar K.B. Gurung from the north-east "purer and divine", it was "spiritually elating" for Bhaswati Ghosh, a young woman who runs her own packaging factory in Calcutta. •

Sharat Pradhan/Haridwar

AMITA MALIK

Poor show

Doordarshan made a mess of their coverage of the IFFI '98

Gone are the days when film festivals were the greatest shows on earth. Especially when our festivals are becoming less and less international by the year.

I remember, one year the national daily for which I covered the festival made my story on the opening of the festival not only front page, but also the lead story on the front page. No more. The faces of Sonia and Vajpayee figure on the front pages in a manner that no film stars can any more.

However, give credit to TV. It took over where newspapers left off and did quite a lot to cover the 1998 festival. In fact, it is said that the programme of a half hour of speeches and the one hour of Mohini Attam, Bharata Natyam, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Kathak, Kathakali and Manipuri was specially commissioned by Doordarshan which wanted a *desi filmi geet*-and-dance slant also. They were performed all together on the Siri Fort stage to portray national integration. The seven-ballet *tamasha* meant nothing to the foreign guests who could be counted on the fingers of one hand, maybe two, and made a proper mess of these dignified, ancient classical dance forms, reduced to what the Bengalis call a *saath khichuri*.

Then came the TV coverage. Everybody hot-footed it to the press conference and covered the same people saying the same things every day. Then, when their reviewing power dried up, the anchors got hold of Deepti Naval, Saeed Akhtar Mirza and whoever else could be collared and got them to do the reviews instead.

Doordarshan, which had the longest half-hour slot, gave it away grandly to an outside advertising agency. Their half hour on DD2 had a thin young man shivering in the cold, talking at sound barrier speed in a thin, weak, adolescent voice so that he swallowed the names of the films as well as the people doing them and no one could make out a word of what he said. Then came long film clips with no comments. There were no interviews. Film personalities were plonked in front of a mike and asked to say something. The results can be guessed.

Surely Mr S.S. Gill had enough technical and programme talent on DD's staff to do the coverage of as simple and familiar an event as a film festival and did not have to hand it over to commercial interests with apparently no experience or skill in producing such programmes. As it is, DD's staff have been snubbed over election coverage given entirely to outsiders. Now the film festival was handed over on a platter to incompetent people. All this augurs very badly for the so-called autonomy to the 40,000-odd staff of DD, some of whom are very competent and well able to do such coverage.

That DD's staff is in the firing line is proved by the arrest of four DD News staff from the Guwahati Kendra of Doordarshan. As one news producer said, surely it is Mr S.S. Gill who should have been arrested and not those carrying out his diktats. It is becoming increasingly clear that what with every party accusing DD News of political bias and making loud threatening noises about what they will do to Prasar Bharati and its members when they come in, it looks as if the Star Wars are going to extend beyond STAR Plus and Basu to Prasar Bharati and Gill.

It is time all the channels came together to protect their common interests in sheer self-defence and stopped their bickering over petty issues. The media should be bigger than the government and not under its constant bullying and harassment. That is what autonomy is about. With technology advancing at lightning speed and digital technology fastest of all, the silly laws which still operate in India and the sillier way in which they are enforced is making India obsolete in the TV race. The sooner everyone, including the ministry of information any broadcasting and its out-of-date closed-mind bureaucrats realise this, the better. Because they should be educating the politicians to look forward and not misleading them in looking backwards •

Prasar Bharati CEO S.S. Gill: had no reason to hand over the coverage of IFFI'98 to outsiders

The turnaround

Azhar and Sachin have both proved their mettles in the Independence Cup

A right royal competition developed between Mohammad Azharuddin and Sachin Tendulkar. Commitment was total as both fought to excel. The result: a stunning performance by India in Bangladesh's Independence Cup competition. And it could well cement Azhar's position as captain of India through next year's World Cup in England.

Sachin had no choice really. Always kept on a short leash by the selectors, his leadership qualities did not flower. And all his protests against the allegation of the burden of captaincy affecting his game fell on deaf ears. Statistically speaking, he had a good 1997, scoring over a thousand runs each in both Tests and limited-overs. No mean feat for a cricketer.

But it was perhaps his inability to read ground situations, lack of innovative ideas and his refusal to change set patterns of play that got India into a rut. Time and again, the national side lost matches from winning positions. At the end of the day, everyone wants positive results — which Tendulkar somehow failed to deliver.

For him, the Dhaka outing was a no-win situation. If he didn't perform, it would mean a lack of commitment because he had been removed from captaincy. If he did well, it was because he "didn't have the load of captaincy" on his shoulders. As a professional, he had no choice but to prove to his detractors that he was as good a player as he had ever been.

For Azharuddin, there could not have been better playing conditions. He had got the captaincy back and his form had touched a new peak. Under him, the team took on a new, aggressive look — after a long time.

The aggressiveness was evident from the very first match, fittingly reaching a climax in deciding the third final of the Independence Cup. The three-team competition got off to a virtual no-contest between the hosts and India.

Then came Pakistan. Two resounding victories perched India on a seemingly unassailable position, especially the eight-wicket win was perhaps the most comprehensive ever by India against their arch-rivals. And it set Indian minds at rest over this competition.

But Pakistan came back strongly in the second match to level scores and serve a warning to India against its complacence. That match exposed the limitations of Indian bowling mercilessly.

The deciding match, of course, will always be remembered as a classic. A cliff-hanger to beat all heart-stoppers, this match took India to a new height. Up until then, India had almost always presented a soft underbelly. When Pakistan piled up 314 in just 48 overs, there were few even in the Indian camp who had any hope. But Tendulkar went on the rampage, getting 41 in just 26 deliveries. Another hard hitter was Robin Singh, whose 82 will rank as one of the best efforts in his career.

Of course, it was Sourav Ganguly who really took the fight to the opposition. Although Saeed Anwar scored more than him (140), Sourav's was the knock that decided the game. The interruption in play, the fading and often uneven light could not stop the flow of his delectable 124 or his claim to the Man of the Match award.

The Independence Cup was ultimately Tendulkar's homecoming. As Man of the Series, he proved once again that he was the kingpin — as far as player-utility was concerned. He has reinforced the belief that he is a better player when not captain. And perhaps just as well, because Azhar will certainly need the services of an all-rounder of Sachin's calibre. For Sachin, a wait till the end of the 1999 World Cup won't hurt, because he could lead the country for a good five years thereafter.

However, all this is subject to the selectors' whims. And, of course, Azhar's acid test is the upcoming series against Australia. •

Arijit Sen/Calcutta

Azhar got the captaincy back and his form touched a new peak, while Tendulkar as Man of the Series reinforced the belief that he is a better player when not captain

ORISSA

Sex, lies and videotape

Seven young girls in Kendrapara commit suicide, blowing the lid on a sordid blue-film racket and raising a political storm

On 25th December, 1997, 26-year-old Annapurna Mohanty of Bankal village in Patkura, under Kendrapara police station of Orissa, committed suicide by swallowing pesticides. Within the next few days, six other girls suffered the same fate. This bizarre chain of events has blown the lid on a sordid sex-racket and raised a political storm in Orissa.

Abhaya Chandra Mohanty, Annapurna's brother, told Sunday: "On 20th December, she went to Kendrapara town to buy some medicines. She returned home (to the village of Karandlia Patna, also called Rankal) on 21st afternoon. She was behaving strangely, and keeping to herself. On 23rd, she went to Cuttack with her sister-in-law. She returned the next day. On 25th morning, she started crying for help. She then told my mother she had consumed pesticides during the night. We took her to the Kendrapara Medical but she died on the 25th."

Annapurna was involved with a young man called Nirakar Swain, a bamboo trader in Gop Square of Kendrapara. They had met a couple of years back, while Annapurna was studying in Tulasi Women's College and staying in a private mess nearby.

After finishing her studies, she returned to her village, but frequented Kendrapara on some pretext or the other to meet Nirakar, who had promised to marry her. But then, Nirakar began wooing another young woman, who promised to help him get a police job through her father and bring him a hefty dowry.

When Annapurna came to know about this, she threatened to tell all. In order to silence her, Nirakar hatched a diabolical plan. He contacted notorious goons like Madan Patri, Sankar Parida and Papu Singh who ran a blue-film racket.

SURENDRA PATRA

COURTESY ISHA

DEMANDING JUSTICE: *Abhaya Mohanty (left), brother of victim Annapurna*

SURENDRA PATRA

CALL THE CBI: *a students' demonstration in Bhubaneswar*

On 20 December, when Annapurna went to Kendrapara, Nirakar and one Harihar Mohapatra met her on the way and took her to see a movie, promising to drop her off at her sister's house after the show. But they took her to Madan Patri's house, where Nirakar and Mohapatra had sex with her. Then, Papu Singh, Madan Patri and Sankar Parida arrived. When Papu tried to force himself on Annapurna, she protested. But the men photographed her in the nude and threatened to hand over the photographs to "the police and the people" if she protested. A hapless Annapurna gave in. While Nirakar and Patri left, the rest of the gang went on shooting video and still photographs of Annapurna through the night, and then left her in the morning. She returned home with some help from Hari Mohapatra.

Over the next few days, Annapurna tried to recover the negatives and cassettes but failed. Driven by despair, she consumed pesticides on the night of 24 December, after everybody in the family had gone to sleep. She died the next day.

Abhaya Mohanty finally mustered up the courage to file an FIR at Kendrapara police station on 4 January. Till now, two persons have been arrested and their bail pleas rejected by the court. But four other accused remain untraced. "Even today, whenever anybody meets Madan in Chowdwar Jail, he threatens to kill me," says Abhaya. When the police went to arrest Parida, they found an undergraduate girl-student of a nearby college in Kendrapara at his house.

Annapurna's suicide was followed, in quick succession, by six young girls, including: 20-year-old Swarnalata of Sasanpada under Patkura police station, the 16-year-old daughter of Gobi Behra of Madhial village, 16-year-old Baula Mallick of

Manpatna, the 20-year-old daughter of a medicine-store owner of Patamundai, and 20-year-old Gitarani Rana, alias Ahilya, in Poilo village of Balia panchayat. A young girl named China of Patkura had also tried to kill herself by consuming pesticides, but she was saved by her family members.

All these girls were victims of a blue-film racket in Kendrapara. According to the police, about 20 people were running the show. They lured attractive and ambitious young girls (mainly from Tulsi Women's College) from poor or lower middle-class background, living in private messes.

Apart from sending shock-waves through the Kendrapara society, the suicides and the unearthing of this sex-racket have caused a political controversy. With elections just a few weeks away, the scandal has taken on a distinct political hue.

Sparking off the trouble was a letter discovered on the body of Gitarani Rana. Though her body had been burnt by some of the miscreants, the police discovered a letter written on the letterpad of the state higher education minister, Bhagabat Prasad Mohanty. It was addressed to Gitarani and written by the personal orderly of the minister, Bhanja Kishore Jena. In the letter, Jena mentions a government job which was to be given to Gitarani, and advices her to come to Bhubaneswar ready to embark on a long tour.

"Some people are trying to tarnish the image of the education minister. But he wasn't involved in the racket in any way. Some political people are trying to give a political colour to the incident, with an eye on the coming elections," observes Ambika Prasad Das, journalist and director of the Urban Bank in Kendrapara.

But veteran BJP leader and former Kendrapara MLA Bed Prakash Agrawal crucifies Mohanty: "In the case of Gitarani Rana of Balia, who committed suicide in her house, the police seized a letter written by the personal orderly of the higher education minister on the minister's official letterpad. What more proof do we need? It would be proper for Shri Bhagabat Mohanty to step down on moral grounds."

SURENDRA PATRA

SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL?: *Tulasi Women's College*

"If somebody takes away my letterpad and uses it for his personal messages, how can I prevent him? He was in my house and when I came to know of this I suspended him," is minister B.P. Mohanty's counterpoint.

There's more to this sordid case than the question of Mohanty's alleged involvement. Expressing serious concern over the Kendrapara sex-scandal, the Orissa High Court has directed the state government to produce the status report of the investigation by the crime branch immediately. On 13 January, a division Bench comprising Chief Justice S.N. Phukan and Justice Arijit Pasayat observed that the court would like to monitor the investigation and issue notices to the crime branch and the principal of the Tulsi Womens' College, Krushna Chandra Bastia.

The High Court was responding to a writ petition filed by Prasant Kumar Naik, president of an NGO called 'The Proleat', and Manoj Kumar Rout of Kendrapara. A young lawyer of Kendrapara, Subhendu Mohanty, has filed a separate petition in the High Court.

Both the petitions allege that a sex-racket has been operating in Kendrapara since 1995, with the criminals blackmailing several young girls after clicking them in the nude. The petitioners alleged that the racket was being allowed to operate by several politicians of the ruling party and some top administrative officials in the area. Apprehending suppression of facts by the state government's investigating agency, the petitioners have urged the High Court to hand over the investigations to the CBI.

SURENDRA PATRA

MAN IN THE MIDDLE: *higher education minister B.P. Mohanty*

Almost everyone, except chief minister J.B. Patnaik, is keen that the CBI be called in. BJP leader Bed Prakash Agrawal was quick to demand a CBI enquiry into the matter "in view of the alleged link of a senior minister of the government in it".

Even Jayanti Patnaik, wife of JB and former chairman of the Women's Commission, has demanded a CBI probe. "The state police cannot be trusted in this matter as highly-placed persons are involved," feels Tapasai Praharaj, of the All India Democratic Women's Association.

ABVP activists, led by Supriya Panda, *gheraoed* the state secretariat at Bhubaneswar on 7 January and raised the demand for a CBI enquiry. The next day, an AISF team of Orissa, led by A. Anuradha, state council member, Samaika Parida and Monika Goon staged a *dharna* outside the state Assembly, and called for the CBI.

Veteran politician Kalindi Charan Behera told SUNDAY that a CBI enquiry was a must as the investigations "could never be done properly by the state crime branch officials".

Chief minister J.B. Patnaik remained unmoved (till the time of going to press) by all the hue and cry. "We should not call the CBI for everything. The state government has already instituted a crime-branch enquiry into the matter..." is what the CM had to say. •

Surendra Patra/Kendrapara

MADHYA PRADESH

Triggering trouble

The death of at least 17 farmers in police firing in Multai, puts Digvijay Singh in a spot

At a time when every political party worth its symbol is trying to put its best pro-poor, pro-farmer foot forward, comes the news of two shocking incidents: the suicide of cotton farmers in Andhra Pradesh to escape the debt trap; and the death of at least 17 farmers, in police firing, in Multai *tehsil* of Betul district in Madhya Pradesh.

The poor farmers of Betul district had been agitating from the first week of January, demanding compensation for the damage of their crops by off-season rains and pests. Kharif crops spread over 40,000 acres in Multai had been damaged and the sowing of Rabi crops had also been affected by rains and hail. The farmers were demanding a compensation of Rs 5,000-per-acre The state government insisted that this was too much. Hence the stand-off.

The protest demonstrations were being held under the aegis of the Kisan Sangharsh Samiti, a non-political forum of farmers in Betul. On 9 January, the farmers had *gheraoed* the district headquarters. The next day, they organised a *chakka jam* on the Betul-Multai road.

UNDER FIRE: *chief minister Digvijay Singh*

On 12 January, the farmers targeted Multai, bordering Maharashtra. According to eyewitness accounts, the police made no attempt to prevent the farmers from reaching the *tehsil* office. But when the police did swing into action, there was no lathicharge or warning shots fired in the air. They began firing indiscriminately at the protestors. The official death-toll read 17, but eyewitnesses insisted that many more farmers had been killed.

The district administration claimed that the farmers had barged into the office, snatched weapons from policemen, and set some vehicles ablaze. So, the police were forced to retaliate. Chief minister Digvijay Singh, who has ordered a judicial inquiry into the incident, defended the police action. "There was no option but to open fire," said the CM.

With elections round the corner, the Multai massacre has become an important political issue. The farmers' rally was being led by Dr Sunilam, a Janata Dal leader. The authorities allege that Sunilam provoked the farmers to 'attack' the office.

But serious questions are being raised about the administration's role. The Betul authorities had been warned by the Kisan Sangharsh Samiti that it would 'target' the *tehsil* office on 12 January. Two days before that, collector Rajnish Vaishya had, himself, addressed a farmers' meet, and voiced support for their demands. Prohibitory orders, under Section 144, had been clamped on the 12th, but no effort was made to cordon-off the office or stop the agitationists.

"Without any warning, the police started firing from the roof-top of the *tehsil* office. It was indiscriminate firing killing innocents," alleged Vijay Khandelwal, Bharatiya Janata

Different strokes

Muivah and Swu overrule GPRN resolutions against those participating in the elections in Nagaland

The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) may still be the most potent insurgent force in the north-east. But there is a definite lack of coordination and unanimity within the NSCN (Isak-Mulvah). The confusion in the NSCN(I-M) ranks centres around its stand on the forthcoming elections in Nagaland.

In view of its ongoing talks with the Government of India, the NSCN leadership is opposed to the idea of holding elections at this critical juncture. A ceasefire is on, as are deliberations that could decide the future course of the 'struggle' and the status of Nagaland.

Recently, some radical Resolutions issued by the Government of the Peoples Republic of Nagaland (GPRN) on this matter, caused a stir. L.B. Singh, principal secretary, GPRN, spelt out the resolutions adopted at "the Meeting of the Council of Kilonsers (ministers), held on 26 Dec., 1997 at the Council Headquarters...:

1. In view of the on-going Political Dialogue between the Government of India and the NSCN, it is decided that, there shall be no elections in Naga areas with immediate effect.

2. It is decided that, any National Worker (NSCN) who is

SANTOSH SAHU

MULTAI MASSACRE: *some victims of the police firing*

Party (BJP) MP from Betul. A fact-finding committee of the BJP, comprising the state president of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha, Kamal Patel, and MLAs Laxminarayan Sharma, S. Sharma and Shailendra Pradhan visited Multai immediately after the incident. The BJP team said that the police chased the innocent farmers to kill them. "Multai is still tense and the people are being terrorised," said Pradhan. "The farmers who had come from outside are not being allowed to leave the place by the district administration."

The BJP has drawn up plans for a massive statewide agitation demanding the dismissal of the Digvijay Singh government. "It is not a simple case of police firing. It is an act of administrative arrogance and displays the political apathy of the present government," alleged a state BJP leader.

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) was drawn into the controversy immediately as supremo Kanshi Ram was addressing a rally in Multai on the very same day. "After the rally ended, the BSP members also joined in the *kisan* rally," said Rajesh, an eyewitness.

This is the fifth controversial case of police firing in Madhya Pradesh since 1996. In March '97, two students were killed in Tikamgarh district when the police opened fire. In May '97, four agitating labourers were killed when the securitymen opened fire in Maihar, Satna. Two more labourers were similarly killed in Khandawa district. In 1996, some farmers fell to police bullets in Amarwada of Chhindwara district.

The Multai firing is bound to have a political fallout in the neigbouring constituencies of Chhindwara, Hoshangabad and Seoni. Trouble has already begun in Chhindwara, with Congress candidate Kamal Nath demanding the resignation of the home minister, the agriculture minister, and the minister in-charge of Betul district.

With the BJP determined to extract maximum political mileage from the firing, and criticism against his administration mounting, the Multai tragedy could not have come at a worse time for Digvijay Singh. •

Deshdeep Saxena/Bhopal

found campaigning for the ensuing elections of the Lok Sabha and Nagaland State Assembly, shall be terminated and dismissed from the National Service without any notice.

3. It is decided that, if any Naga citizen is found filing nomination for the coming elections, he/she shall be treated as Anti-national and be awarded Capital punishment.

4. It is further decided that, if any Naga citizen is found campaigning for the ensuing elections, he/she shall be treated as Anti-national and dealt with seriously."

Even before the dust raised by 'its government's' notification could settle, came a revised Statement from NSCM chairman Isak Chisi Swu and general secretary Thuingaleng Muivah. It was meant to "make the standing Official policy of the National Socialist Council unequivocal" and stated that:

"1. The Resolutions of the Council of Kilonsers are not approved by the collective leadership.

2. NSCN will never use force unless forced upon it and upon the people.

3. NSCN is solemnly committed to the search of solution to the Indo-Naga issue through peaceful political means.

4. NSCN will never go otherwise unless it is betrayed."

After adopting a moderate line, the 'statement' sounded a note of caution by outlining the "reasons which had prompted the Home authority to pass the resolutions...": "(a) The preparation of the Indian Government to impose their elections on the Naga people notwithstanding the latter's repeated approach for not to hold elections in Naga areas in the interest of the ongoing peace process. (b) Pumping of immense money into Nagaland to buy candidates and votes. (c) Serious

POINT-COUNTERPOINT: *the GPRN Resolutions (left) and the NSCN Statement*

lack of sincerity on several counts from the Indian Government's side."

Swu and Mulyah signed off by making it "clear before hand that the Government of India shall be responsible for any problem that may arise from the imposition of the Indian elections on the Naga people". •

Pradeep Parmar/Dimapur

WEST BENGAL

Crimewatch

Growing public resentment forces the state authorities to take on dacoit-gangs operating in and around Calcutta

It was the 29th of August, 1997. At around 3.30 pm, Arati Majumdar and her two sisters, Ira Majumdar and Madhusri Sengupta, were taking a breather after completing their household chores at their Kasba home, in south Calcutta. Suddenly, four persons burst into the room and attacked Arati. Instead of surrendering, the three sisters counter-attacked with whatever they could lay their hands on — pots, pans, etc. The dacoits, taken completely by surprise by this display of woman power, beat a hasty retreat. The police, of course, turned up much later.

This incident kind of sums up the situation in Calcutta and its suburbs, which witnessed at least 42 dacoities and 171 robberies last year. In 1996, the number of dacoities was pegged at 25. At least seven major dacoities took place in Calcutta during November-December '97.

With dacoities and robberies on the rise, and the police failing to do much about it, the public-resentment index has been rising. Proof: the recent lynching of eight dacoits at Chakberia, in Sonarpur of South 24-Parganas. The dacoits were killed by a mob while trying to flee after looting Rs 1 lakh from the Narayanpur branch of Allahabad Bank.

At around 1 pm, on 6 January, a gang of eight dacoits reached Narayanpur, a city suburb, in an ambassador. They parked their car at the Narayanpur crossing on Basanti Road and proceeded to the bank nearby. After looting the bank, they rushed to their car and fled towards Sonarpur.

Alerted by the cries of the bank employees, local residents went after the dacoits. Policemen from Bhangar *thana*, led by officer-in-charge Pradip Ray, joined in the chase. To keep the villagers at bay, the dacoits started firing in the air.

At Chakberia, Sonarpur, the fugitive car crashed into a van-rickshaw and overturned. The bank-dacoits then began to run for their lives. But they were soon overtaken and overpowered by the locals. The furious mob began to bash up the criminals. And by the time the police made it to the spot, the eight dacoits had been beaten to death.

This incident was a slap on the face of the government machinery which has been trying to mobilise public opinion against mob-lynching. The government of West Bengal, through various agencies, has been urging the people not to take the law into their own hands.

"But if the police fail to do their job, it is left to the public to punish the criminals. The police are often hand-in-glove with the dacoits. They know everything, but refuse to act," says Debdas Ghosh, a shopowner near Bhangar.

The dacoits and robbers operating in the West Bengal capital have grown increasingly intrepid over the last few months. On 16 January, robbers murdered a courier-firm employee and looted Rs 3 lakh from him in the busy Burrabazar area in broad daylight. This was another one of those hit-loot-run cases now all-too-common in Calcutta.

The spate of dacoities in and around Calcutta does reflect poorly on the state's police force, and exposes the obvious communication gap between the Calcutta Police and the West Bengal Police. Taking advantage of this, dacoits often pull off a heist in areas under the jurisdiction of the West Bengal Police and take shelter in zones manned by the Calcutta Police, and vice versa.

In a desperate bid to plug the loopholes, nab the dacoits, and restore some credibility, state home (police) minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee read the riot act recently. He admitted that the police had failed to round up the major gangs operating in Calcutta due to the leakage of information regarding police operations. A major reshuffle in the city police's anti-dacoity section followed.

And the new-look team has tasted some success in nabbing the dacoits. In August '97, when a Federal Bank near Tangra, in east Calcutta, was being looted, a local resident identified one of the dacoits as Manoj Singh. She later informed the local police who refused to act. She then took her case to the higher-ups. Acting on her tip- off, and guided by Suraj, a law-clerk of Bankshall Court, a police team tracked down Manoj Singh, Abdul Gain and Israfil. Seven other members of the gang responsible for the last five major dacoities in Calcutta,

MEN WHO MATTER: *minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee (left) and police commissioner D.C. Vajpai*

AFTER A DACOITY: *a familiar scene on the streets of Calcutta*

RED ALERT: *a police patrol in Calcutta*

were then arrested during raids conducted at three hideouts near Shyambazar.

After lengthy interrogations at Lalbazar, the city's police headquarters, a final operation was chalked-out. The police got hold of the girlfriend of gang-leader Wazed Akungi and then trapped him at Kalindi, in north Calcutta.on 3 January. After a fierce encounter, the police managed to arrest Wazed.

While these operations have brought some cheer to the police ranks, the sudden transfer of three senior officers of the anti-dacoity department on the eve of the 'final operation', has caused some bad blood. While Nazrul Islam, deputy commissioner of police (detective department), told SUNDAY that "their transfer was routine", the Police Association here has called it an "arbitrary step".

Meanwhile, Dinesh Vajpai , Calcutta's police commissioner, is probing the "leakage of information" from the police camp to the dacoits'. He will be submitting his report to the state home secretary.

The state authorities are finally getting their anti-dacoity act together. But the state and city police will have to keep a strict vigil if they are to regain the confidence of the people. •

Soumen Datta/Calcutta

Starting over

ELTV becomes Zee India TV

Last week, ELTV metamorphosed into Zee India TV. The transformation from a frivolous, lightweight channel, which housed Zee rejects, repeats and films, to a channel which has news, views, and analysis may appear sudden. But Zee spokesperson P.C. Lahiri insists that it is a well-thought-out move.

It is certainly timely. With elections upon us and with sister-channel Zee bursting at the seams with money-spinning serials and sitcoms, with absolutely no space for anything else, it was the logical thing to do.

It is also clever. Zee has a very clear brand identity: its entertainment components are so strong that the serious stuff tends to get lost. Now India TV will be Zee's serious side, and be able to showcase such informative programmes as Umesh Upadhyaya's *Insight* and Radhika Kaul Batra's *Helpline*, alongwith brand new election-related segments.

Former PM and TV-friendly-personality Chandra Shekhar gets to helm his own show as part of the package. Called *Disha Samvad, Chandra Shekhar Ka Desh Ke Saath* (Friday, 8.30 pm), it opens with the host doing an address to the nation on issues of import. He then

SHOWMAN: *former PM Chandra Shekhar*

invites eminent-types to share the platform: knowing Chandra Shekhar's penchant for earthy wit and ready repartee, this should be entertaining television.

Something else to look out for is a talk-show hosted by M.J. Akbar with three *netas* from opposing camps engaging in debate on the hot topic of the week. And I also like the sound of *Vision Beyond 50*, which will have famous persons talk about past events which have impacted our lives.

Other programmes include *Yeh Hai Politics*, an irreverent take on politics and politicians, and *Campaign Trail*, which will trawl the constituencies in search of winning and losing trends. •

SUNDAY WEEK

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 25 JANUARY, 1998

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

Take time to study others. It may not be easy to get cooperation unless you are prepared to put yourself out. This may threaten your security, or so you may think. But it could be a gentle reminder that you should be more forthcoming. Make arrangements for a social gathering or function.

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

You may get an offer of help. This suits you as more hands will make work lighter. There is also the opportunity to have a chat about things that are of mutual interest with friends. Legalities can be sorted out. Be glad you have the help of someone with authority who will speak on your behalf.

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

An agreement with someone important can be worked out. This could be a landmark of sorts in a partnership. You feel the time is right for expansion on a large or worthwhile scale. Buy a gift for someone special or accept one that comes from the same source. Be considerate and gentle.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

Get yourself organised. Preparations for the coming year can take up time. It is an ideal time for tidying up loose ends and getting things into working order. Think about New Year resolutions: will it be wise to change your diet, for instance?

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

Expenses may be more than you anticipated. The young folk have expensive tastes which makes you think twice about parting with family funds. Extra work may put a strain on your love life and you may find it hard to please everyone. Go along with what you think is the best course of action.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

Older people may be critical but they are likely to understand your problems. Some family arrangements may have to be reconsidered if your guest list gets too long. It may pay you to be cruel in order to be kind. Get your priorities right.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

It may seem like an uneventful week, but in reality there are a number of things you have to do. There can be a reward for past services to your fellows. Preparations for an impending event can be nearing completion. Try a new approach to an old situation. Progress to date will be satisfactory.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

Look after your diet. Overdoing it will land you in trouble, which you must avoid because this is the time you need to be fit. Arrangements made by you will be good. Entertain at home instead of going somewhere unknown. Play it safe.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

Be persuasive in a direct manner if you want to convince or please a partner. Don't try fancy tricks or dodge issues. The spoken word is your best form of communication, but only on an honest level. Domestic conditions can be upsetting. Get someone to give you a helping hand, someone energetic.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

It's possible that this will be a lacklustre week. You may be in doubt as to whether to concentrate on pleasure or work. Make up your mind if you want to get anywhere but don't be surprised if nothing much happens. Assistance is there for the asking and you can get a fair return for good work done.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

You may have to rely on someone to fetch and carry for you To that extent, you may feel that you have lost the edge. Your sins may find you out but you may be able to avoid any aggravation if you are watchful. On the whole, you may as well take it as it comes. Intuition won't let you down.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

People may be ganging up on you or so you think. Mental tension can lead to hasty action. This will be a very busy week as you are obliged to make up a backlog or get things sorted out before work finishes. A colleague may have to be hospitalised. •

Tug-of-war

The AICC is a little worried about the fate of the meeting Sonia Gandhi is to address in Rohtak, Haryana.

The meeting has been fixed for 28 January. But after the last meeting at which Sitaram Kesri was present and PCC chief Bhupinder Singh Hooda's men heckled former chief minister Bhajan Lal, Congressmen are anxious about avoiding a recurrence of such incidents.

Sonia Gandhi: In demand

It would be terribly embarrassing for instance, if rival factions began pelting each other with rotten onions or tomatoes, a fairly common practice at public meetings in Haryana, apparently.

Earlier, the rivalry over Sonia Gandhi was between Bhajan Lal and Birender Singh, the latter being the former PCC chief. Both leaders, well known in the state, have been sidelined with Hooda having stolen a march over both by actually getting Sonia Gandhi to come to the state.

Carry on Suzuki

At least one person is quite happy to see the Maruti-Suzuki fracas drag on.

Maruti and its Japanese partner Suzuki are slugging it out in the court of arbitration to decide where the Government of India was right to appoint R.S.S.L.N. Bhaskarudu as managing-director of Maruti Suzuki.

The longer the case drags on the better. Especially for sundry bureaucrats like, for instance, Anup Mukherjee, who is joint secretary in the ministry of industry and the man who is regularly dumped on. Mukherjee is not complaining, because he has an excuse to stay on in Delhi. He belongs to the Bihar cadre and given the current political instability in Bihar, he's not particularly anxious to go back to the state. There are many like him.

The odd thing about the Maruti episode is that although the government is a partner in the company, it is treating this one differently from the others. In other companies — PSUs — the government is nominating industrialists and professional managers to the board. In the case of Maruti, bureaucrats are being nominated to the board, beefing up the presence of the government. The government wants to be in the driving seat. Suzuki is in no mood to be driven. And the ones making hay are the bureaucrats.

> HEARD IN CALCUTTA
>
> **There are two of them: there's the *khaas* Congress and the *ghaas* Congress. Which one do you want?**
>
> THE TELEPHONE OPERATOR AT THE WBPCC OFFICE

CHECK-LIST

Why the BJP didn't re-nominate them

Mahant Avaidyanath: Almost 80, the Mahant used to head the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha until he joined the BJP. He belongs to the Kanphata Jogi sect which is so powerful in that region on the Indo-Nepal border. This Mahant is a savvy one: he used to fraternise quite openly with Robin Hood-type criminals in the region. Has opted not to contest on a BJP ticket this time because of his age. His successor is Aditya Nath.

Banwarilal Purohit: Used to represent Nagpur and even has a standing in the city. But he fell out with Pramod Mahajan over the Bhadravati Coal Mine, which was 'almost gifted away' to a company owned by an NRI, apparently at Mahajan's instance. Purohit decided to fight the issue in court and Mahajan insisted he take back the case. The matter went to the high command and it decided to drop Purohit from the seat.

Rajni Patil: Represented Beed, but her spirit has always been with the Congress. She's a Maratha and Sharad Pawar has been in touch with her for nearly two years, persuading her to return to where she belongs. The BJP got an inkling that she might get a Congress ticket so they dropped her from their list. Finally, it seems that her husband may be given the Congress ticket — and may even win.

Vijay Patel: Was keeping the seat warm for L.K. Advani who resigned from Gandhinagar after his name figured in the Havala charge-sheet. Now Advani has bowed to the *diktat* of his party and has decided to fight from Gandhinagar again — so Vijay Patel has to find another seat, or another party.

J.K. Jain: Originally lost the Chandni Chowk seat and the party wasn't too keen to re-nominate him. Vijay Goyal was moved to Chandni Chowk because Madan Lal Khurana had to be accommodated — both to settle the dispute over the chief ministership of Delhi and because a seat had to be found for him. Now Jain is looking for a vacant seat somewhere else.

Bulls eye!

There are many in the Congress who suspect Digvijay Singh of having deliberately started the farmers' agitation in Multai which led to a firing and the death of 16 farmers.

This is because all Digvijay's rivals will be the ones hurt most by the firing ordered by the ruling Congress government. Arjun Singh who shifted from Satna to Hoshangabad, near Multai, in the fond hope that the farmers in the constituency would flock to the Congress in droves, is furious that the state government was unsuccessful in controlling the agitation. Equally jittery is Kamal Nath from the adjoining Chhindwara, who has gone so far as to demand the resignation of the home minister and the agricultural minister.

Congress watchers say Digvijay is unhappy only because Gwalior — Madhavrao Scindia's constituency — is so far away from Multai. •

All in the game

Prime Minister I.K. Gujral's Dhaka visit became an occasion for a little cricket match — played by the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan.

While they were there, the Indian and the Pakistani Prime Ministers — Gujral and Nawaz Sharif — stayed at the Sonargaon Hotel. Also

Nawaz Sharif: talking to his boys

put up at the same hotel were the Indian and Pakistani cricket teams. So it was suggested to Gujral that he meet the Indian team and buck it up a bit. Accordingly, he invited the Indian team to his suite just after lunch, shook captain Azharuddin's hand and told him how happy he was that the Indian team had done so well. The cricketers were thrilled — they had their pictures taken with the PM and were generally preening.

When word got to Nawaz Sharif, he invited the Pakistan team to his suite, the very same day. Also present were four ministers. But instead of pressing food and drink on the cricketers, Nawaz Sharif gave them a thorough dressing down, telling them: *Aapne hamari naak kata di* (you let us down badly). The players were so downcast that they just hung their heads and listened.

However, it had the desired effect. In the next match they played, the Pakistani team thrashed India.

HEARD IN THE AICC

Mulayam's only regret is that Charles Sobhraj left India before he could offer him a ticket.

A CONGRESSMAN REACTING TO THE NEWS THAT DACOIT MALKHAN SINGH WAS GOING TO CONTEST THE ELECTIONS ON A SAMAJWADI PARTY TICKET

Think and vote

The Prasar Bharati effect is showing. Beginning this week, Doordarshan is going to show a series of advertisements as part of a campaign called the Voters Awareness Campaign. This has been visualised by Prasar Bharati member secretary S.S. Gill and is clearly aimed at I.K. Gujral's pet themes. These advertisements are going to tell voters to desist from voting against defectors, criminals and the corrupt.

The ad-line runs: *Jo apne dal ka na hua, woh apne desh ka kya hoga* (How can he who is disloyal to his party be loyal to his country)? *Mallon ko mat chhuo; khud maile ho jaoge* (Don't touch the tainted; and save yourself from taint); and *Apradhiyon ko vote mat do* (Don't vote for criminals).

Obviously the television impact of the Voluntary Disclosure Income Scheme (VDIS) has had a ripple effect. This series of advertisements has a creative touch — it has been created by Bollywood lyricist Gulzar.

BAROMETER

The race for the new CBI director: who's up, who's down

↑ **T.N. Mishra:** Is the senior-most special director in the CBI. So logically, he should stand the best chance — he fulfils the Supreme Court fiat that someone who has experience of working in the CBI should be appointed director.

↓ **D.R. Karthikeyan:** The chief of the Special Investigation Team (SIT) and a heavy-handed policeman, Karthikeyan is already on an extension and has only three months left after R.C. Sharma's retirement on 31 January.

→ **R.C. Sharma:** The current CBI chief has appealed to the court to review its judgement that he should not get an extension. If the Supreme Court decides on this before he retires, he still has a chance.

↑ **G. Acharl:** Though junior, is still in the running for the top job because of his proximity to various directors and his handling of controversial cases.

↑ **A.S. Daulet:** An IPS officer of the 1965 cadre, Daulet has no experience in the CBI. But he's from Punjab.

→ **M.B. Kaushal:** The former police commissioner of Delhi is also looking at the job because of his seniority.

Missing the bus

So T.R. Sathishchandran has become Governor of Goa and Rajni Ranjan Sahu has been pipped at the post.

Sahu was to have been appointed for the job at the time when Sitaram Kesri and I.K. Gujral were still friends. When Kesri stabbed him in the back, Gujral saw no reason to continue kowtowing to him and chose instead to appoint Sathishchandran who will always be one of the most upright bureaucrats of our time. When he was principal secretary to the Prime Minister, the job he last held (he resigned when Deve Gowda stepped down from the prime ministership) the relationship between the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the Cabinet secretary was the healthiest. There was no jockeying for power and a sense of balance in the relationship.

However, Sahu is feeling a bit let down, because he reckons the job was rightfully his. Now he'll have to wait until the Congress is in power.

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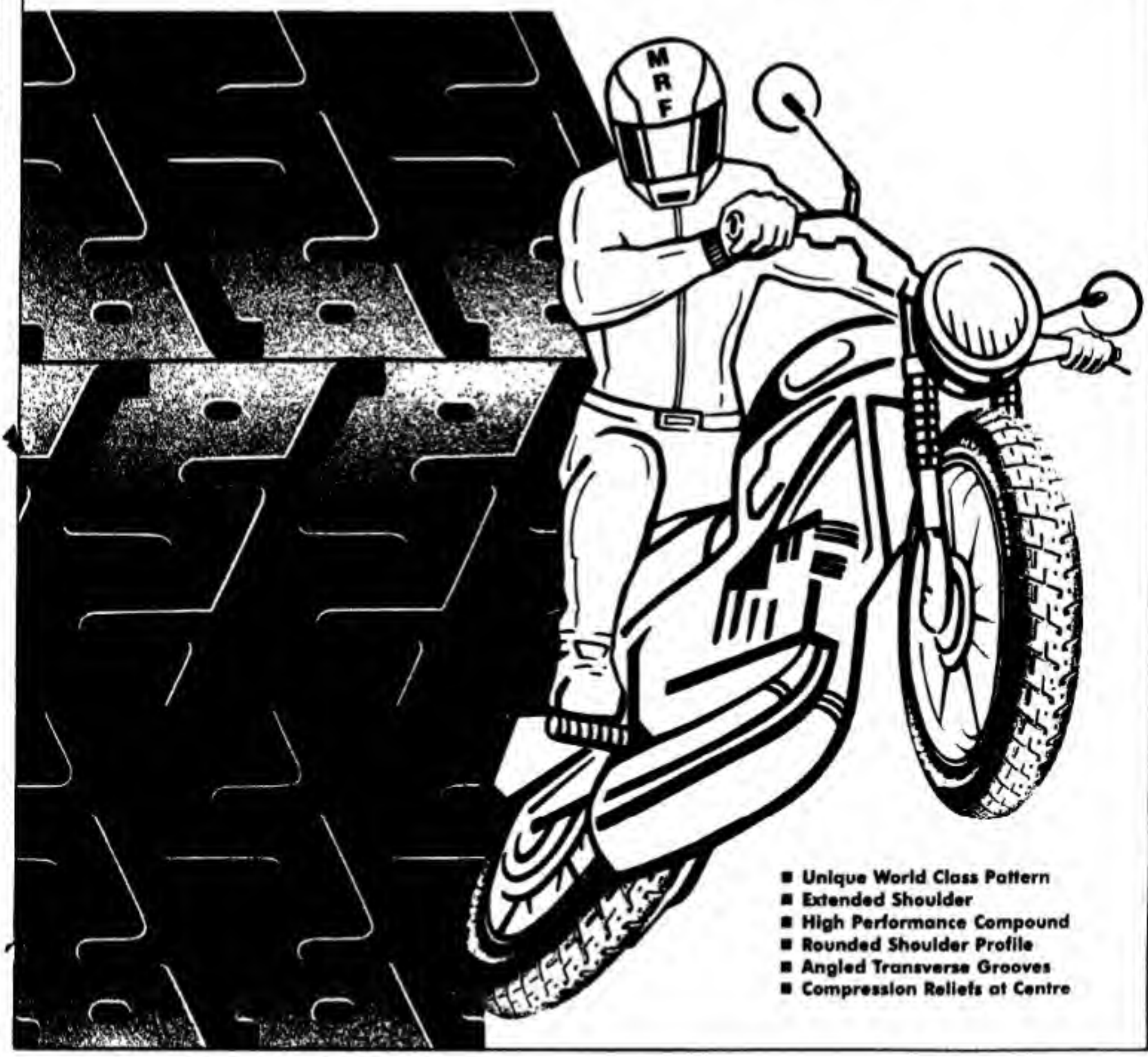

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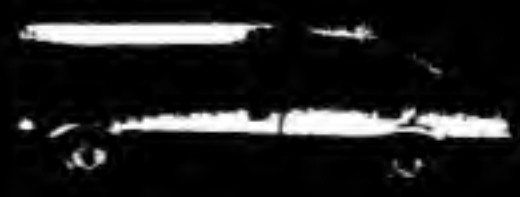

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SUKHOI: THE GREAT PLANE ROBBERY

SUNDAY

If not Atal Behari Vajpayee, then who?

Understanding the candidates and the combinations

THE SEARCH FOR A PM

Atal Behari Vajpayee

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Oriental magic

At the IFFI '98, the Asian entries saved the day

Lady with a mission

Your cover story, *Kesri who?* (18—24 January) was extremely readable. Your correspondent is right in pointing out that 'not everyone is euphoric after Sonia Gandhi has taken the plunge'. Truly, Congress president Kesri is worried, though he is desperately trying to show signs of relief.

The Lady of Janpath has ultimately broken her silence and is immersed in the rough and tumble of electoral politics. And much to the chagrin of many in the Congress, she is shaking off her initial indecisiveness with every passing week. What is apparent after her first campaign week is that Sonia is sincerely driven by a mission and a sense of duty. And they are providing her the motivation that could drive her to conclude that politics and political office are not such bad things after all.

Sonia is undoubtedly a shrewd woman who is also being very well advised. It might have taken some time for her to determine what her body language should be, but she and her team were clear from the outset about what she would say, when, where and how.

Rajat Hazra, Calcutta (West Bengal)

■There is no gainsaying the fact that Sonia's entry has given the Congress a fresh lease of life. And her presence has already electrified the party supporters.

Will this fresh verve in the party coupled with the fact that Sonia's is a refreshing new face and a distinctly different voice propel the Congress to power? Or has she mistimed her entry and left it too late to woo back enough of the party's lost supporters?

When the votes are counted four weeks from now, we will learn the answer to that.

B.S. Rana, Jaipur (Rajasthan)

■Your story, *The great Janpath nod* (4—10 January) on the entry of Sonia Gandhi in politics is symptomatic of the unnecessary euphoria that is being created both in the print and the electronic media. No doubt the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty may influence the gullible but the people are no more enamoured of the Dynasty.

It may be recalled that the fortunes of the Congress nosedived in the Eighties and only the assassinations of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 saved the party from extinction.

As several Congress leaders are defecting and the once-powerful party is playing second fiddle to regional outfits, there is little hope of revival of its fortunes.

Dr V.Sagar, New Delhi

Sonia Gandhi: taking centre-stage

Battle for UP

Kalyan Singh has candidly stated: *"We have no intention of playing the Ayodhya card"* (4—10 January). But it was Singh who had engineered and monitored the whole incident leading to the demolition of Babri Masjid on 6 December, 1992.

The BJP think-tank now realises that the party had to pay a heavy price for the demolition of Babri Masjid. And, therefore, the leaders now are trying desperately to woo the Hindus by playing the Ayodhya card.

Obviously, the real motive is grabbing power at any cost. The party has already struck an alliance with Jayalalitha. According to Kalyan Singh, the Congress is irrelevant, the JD and Left parties are dead, while the BSP's sun is setting. The only party which can challenge the BJP in UP is Mulayam's Samajwadi Party.

Kalyan Singh: changing tack

Ipsita Ray, New Delhi

Barbarism in Bihar

This has reference to the story, *Witch-hunting* (28 December 1997—3 January 1998). It was not known previously that Bihar, where corruption and violence are quite common, is also dominated by the *dain* culture. Most shameful is that people (mostly higher caste) burn, beat, and even sexually assault some women (belonging to lower caste) labelling them as *dains*. It's surprising how the administration is putting up with this barbaric practice.

Amit Khare deserves praise for his work but it is really doubtful how far he'll be able to remove this social evil. We will feel happy when the people of Bihar become conscious and come forward to put an end to the *dain* culture.

I.C. Firdous, New Delhi

Marxist delusion

This has reference to the story, *The CPI(M) is willin'...* (4—10 January). Your correspondent has discussed the possibility of a

A Left Front rally: history of blunders

Marxist Prime Minister following the next general elections.

During the freedom struggle, the Communists actively helped the colonial masters to try and sabotage the 1942 Quit India movement. The Communists had supported the demand of the Muslim League for dividing the country. And at the time of Chinese aggression in 1962, the Communists had supported China's stance.

Given this history, it is amazing that the Marxists are under a delusion that they can guide the destiny of India.

S. Kapoor, Bombay (Maharashtra)

Southern conquest

The BJP is *Struggling for the south*(28 December 1997—3 January 1998). It's forging an alliance with the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu is significant. It appears as if Jayalalitha has hijacked a Dravidian party and taken it to the BJP.

Whether the BJP or AIADMK will improve its performance or not in Tamil Nadu, the alliance is a breakthrough and gives the BJP a chance to spread its wings over the south. Even if the BJP is not able to get an absolute majority along with its allies this time, it should be able to form the next government.

A. Jacob Sahayam, Tiruvananthapuram (Kerala)

Wrong signals

I wish to correct one of the impressions that might have been conveyed by your correspondent in the story, *Broadening vision* (18—24 January). He says, "DD's relationship with WorldTel has always been smooth where it has been uneasy at best with TWI, the producers of soccer programmes for STAR". This is simply not true — one remembers the recent litigation involving DD and WorldTel over the Cricket World Cup.

I would also point out that TWI has worked alongside DD harmoniously on several home cricket series. Most recently we worked wih DD on the Sri Lanka vs India series, and we will shortly be working with them again on the Australia tour of India. We also worked closely with DD on the Gold Flake Open Tennis Championship, the Indian Badminton Open, and our weekly sports programme *Sports India* is shown on DD. Far from an uneasy relationship, it is a cordial and productive one.

Mark Lynch, Head of production, TWI, New Delhi

World Cup '96: cricket for all

PM-in-waiting?

Rajiv Shukla's inference that if Sonia is projected as the next Prime Minister, the Congress might come to power, *Power Play* (11—17 January), is debatable.

Doubtless Sonia's presence would provide a fresh fillip to the Congress, but the traditional belief that the Gandhis are born to rule and Sonia will stop the BJP juggernaut appears a slightly preposterous. Does liberalisation mean 'importing' from Italy a leader to salvage a sinking party?

There seems to be no purity in Kesri's intention in installing Sonia as the redeemer of the party. It is being thrust upon her in sheer desperation. The stock-market crash and the miserable devaluation of the rupee should wake up sycophants. Saving the nation, and not any particular party or individual, is the need of the hour.

Dr U.S. Iyer, Bangalore (Karnataka)

In the story, Fragile republic, *(18—24 January), the penultimate paragraph should read: Since there is little useful life left in the present House, the King has acted wisely and constitutionally in referring the matter to the Supreme Court.* — Editor

Contributed by Shyamal Kumar Manna, Calcutta (West Bengal)

MILESTONES

APPOINTED: K. Ramachandran, as vice-president and managing director of Philips India Limited.

APPOINTED: S.M. Kidwai, as managing director of Tata Tea. He assumed charge on 1 February. Kidwai succeeds R.K. Krishna Kumar.

RESIGNED: central textiles minister R.L.

Jalappa from the Union Cabinet, on 20 January. Earlier he quit the Janata Dal to join the Congress party.

JOINED: B.P. Maurya, former AICC general secretary and a close aide of P.V. Narasimha Rao, the Bharatiya Janata Party, on 20 January.

SET UP: a Tata trust, for funding recognised political parties, to bring in transparency in election funding.

LAUNCHED: a new political party, named Asom Jatiya Sanmilan, by associates of former state home minister Bhrigu Kumar Phukan, on 22 January.

DIED: Bholanath Sen, eminent lawyer and former state minister in the Congress government in West Bengal, on 18 January, in Calcutta.

SIGHT & SOUND

SURENDRA/THE HINDU

■ We are not interested in disturbing his government. We resigned as ministers to join R.K. Hegde and answer the national call for a stable government. We had no complaints against Mr Patel.

R.V. DESHPANDE, *one of the leaders who quit the J.H. Patel ministry in Karnataka*

■ The Janata Dal has been reduced to a regional party and property controlled by one family — the Gowda family.

R.L. JALAPPA, *former Union minister of textiles, after joining the Congress party*

■ We have asked Gujral *sahib* to file nomination papers and leave the rest to us. Every Akali worker in Jalandhar will be working towards his victory with all resources at his disposal.

GURCHARAN SINGH TOHRA, *president of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee*

■ They snatched Rajiv away from me, but they can't snatch his dreams because his dreams belong to Hindustan.

SONIA GANDHI, *addressing a rally in Bhubaneswar*

■ It is my party workers who gave their lives for the protection of Babri Masjid.

MULAYAM SINGH YADAV, *Samajwadi Party president, pointing out that it is his party, and not the Congress, who should get the credit for protecting Muslim interests*

■ I guess we have to accept reality — that we're good as long as we're hot and happening.

MANISHA KOIRALA, *film actress*

SEEN

NEPAL'S TAJ MAHAL

The Ranighat Palace is being restored to its original glory

A MAGNIFICENT VIEWPOINT: *Ranighat Palace by the Kaliganga*

A 107 years after it was built for the youngest of his three wives, the favourite Tejeshwar Kumari Rana, the grand Kaliganga-view Ranighat Palace is being restored to its former Rana glory.

An army of Tamang workers from Kathmandu has established camp from Ranighat, three hours' descent from central Nepal's 5,000-foot high Palpa Tansen, headquarters of Khadka Shamsher Jung Bahadur Rana, the then governor of Palpa district.

Son of the legendary commander in chief, Gen. Vir Shamsher Rana, Khadka was one of the 17 brothers who divided and ruled Nepal till he was exiled in 1897 by his elder brother Bir Shamsher, the Teen Sarkar and the Prime Minister of Nepal. The Paanch Sarkar Shah kings in those days were held in virtual captivity by their Rana Prime Ministers. Khadka is remembered for organising a *coup d'etat* against his uncle, the childless Rana Uddip and even more, for building another palace in Kathmandu and a temple at Lord Buddha's birthplace, Lumbini.

Ranighat has been billed as the star attraction for Visit Nepal 1998 and described as the Taj Mahal of Nepal. It is certainly a Taj Mahal with a difference: mix of Victorian and Buddhist architecture, the double-storeyed building is perched on the last leg of a wooded spur, running into the Kaliganga river flowing downstream.

Twenty-nine steps lead into Tejeshwar Kumari Rani's ghat, complete with a water tank a few feet above the river line. It is here Tej Kumari descended for her ritual bath while Khadka roamed the jungles. How Khadka reached Ranighat is anyone's guess, given the narrow path from Tansen through thick forest and gurgling waterfall to Ranighat.

Inside Ranighat is a magnificent viewpoint. Remnants of large airy rooms, stables, kitchens, quarters for servants and a row of three identical temples, the only structures not scavenged by man or nature. The reason is the three generations of *pujaris* who have not deserted the place.

A sprinkling of foreign tourists and a flock of villagers marvel at this roadless hideaway palace twice devastated by squalls and cloudbursts. The Rs one crore restoration work is unlikely to meet its target of completion by 1998. There is yet another threat to Nepal's Taj Mahal: the Italian hydroelectric project diverting the Kali waters into a tunnel 18 km upstream.

For Nepal's sake one hopes and prays the waters do not reduce to a muddy trickle. Otherwise Ranighat would be like a ghat out of water. •

Ashok K. Mehta/Ranighat

The double-storeyed building is perched on the last leg of a wooded spur, running into the Kaliganga flowing downstream

The Left made easy

Sitaram Yechury *is the more acceptable face of the CPI(M). His views*

Put a face to the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The first image would be that of Harkishen Singh Surjeet, the party's crafty general secretary. Ask him about the party's support to someone like Mulayam Singh Yadav for prime ministership and he'll shout at you: "What is wrong with Mulayam?"

You can be forgiven for dismissing the entire CPI(M) as rude, cantankerous and supporters of politicians with a dacoit-base. But not if you put on the television and tune into a current affairs discussion. In all probability, Sitaram Yechury will be a panellist from the party

The boyish Yechury will patiently explain to a loud R.K. Dhawan and a sneering Jaswant Singh that it is not the individual but the party that matters: "Mulayam's anti-communal credentials are above suspicion; one just doesn't go into personal attributes." All with an engaging smile guaranteed to win over even the most hardened anti-CPI(M) TV viewer

In fact, in the age of satellite television, the party's youngest Politburo member has emerged as the more acceptable face of the CPI(M).

What has helped of course is that the communist parties are no longer just a red fringe on the country's saffron-and-green political fabric. While communism died a sudden (some say natural) death all over the globe, the Indian voter sent back as many as 54 MPs from the Left parties in the last Lok Sabha elections. As many as 33 were from the CPI(M). Suddenly, what the Left felt and thought became an issue that was discussed not only in the boardrooms of Bombay's Nariman Point — but much to the finance minister's chagrin — even in North Block.

And Yechury's role grew more definitive. He was part of the United Front steering committee which drafted out its manifesto. It was solely because of the Left that issues close to P. Chidambaram's heart such as the privatisation of the insurance sector and public sector

V RAJAGOPAL

"Unless we maintain the secular democratic fabric of India, there cannot be any development," says Yechury, lighting up a Charms. "And we will cooperate with those who are willing to achieve this objective"

disinvestment were left out of the Common Minimum Programme.

Of course, it is another matter that the government tried to push these through regardless. Which brings out another contradiction: why is the CPI(M) part of a front with which it has little in common, other than keeping the BJP out?

Again, it is the voice of reason that explains. "Unless we maintain the secular democratic fabric of India, there cannot be any development," says Yechury, lighting up a Charms cigarette — a sure sign that he's in the mood to talk. "And we will cooperate with those who are willing to achieve this objective."

But what about the country's economic development as preached by the Left?

"The Congress, BJP and the non-Left parties all subscribe to the same economic policy. That contradicts the Left's vision for India," he explains. "Therefore our experience with the UF is that we have achieved our first objective of preserving the secular democratic fabric. As far as the second (economic) objective is concerned, the struggle is on. Which is why the Left is outside the government and not part of it," he adds.

Time for another cigarette and controversy No. 2.

Why is the Left speaking with two voices on the issue of a) joining the government and b) Jyoti Basu's candidature as Prime Minister? In fact, the 'voice of reason' has often been described in his own party as a hardliner on this issue.

"He (Jyoti Basu) was questioned if he would take up the responsibility, if asked. And he answered that he had never shirked any responsibility. If health permitted, he would. That is all that he said," recalled Yechury.

Well, in the words of a television interviewer, he didn't say no.

"That's as close to saying no," exclaims Yechury. What he leaves unsaid is that it is not just the hardliners like Yechury but even the party MPs who would not be happy to head a government with Congress support. The party's bastion is in West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala. In all the three states the party is fighting the Congress rather than the BJP.

And what about Yechury himself? He has the right image: young, honest and articulate. He even has a vision of India. But when you ask him if he'd contest an election, he laughs.

Unlike Jyoti Basu, he does not talk obliquely of 'shirking responsibility'. Instead, he asks, "Is the whole concept of political life reduced to fighting an election? I'm not discounting it. But it's just a personal choice."

But — like Jyoti Basu — he does not say no either.

"Jyoti Basu was questioned if he would take up the responsibility, if asked. And he answered that he had never shirked any responsibility. If health permitted, he would," said Yechury

Harkishen Singh Surjeet: the crafty communist

Over the years, the 44-year-old Yechury has carved out a niche for himself within the party's rigid hierarchy. Instead of operating behind closed doors and smoke-filled rooms, he has a more open attitude to the outside world.

True, he also works in smoke-filled rooms, but the doors are open.

Which is why the media picks on Yechury when it wants the CPI(M)'s point of view. And he is savvy enough to use this to his advantage — for example he can give the BJP's Pramod Mahajan a run for his money when it comes to smiling away uncomfortable questions in front of the television cameras (a comparison that will not find favour with either man).

Again, while Yechury sticks to the party's manifesto (also drafts it at times), he sees no sense in shunning five-star hotels and the good life just for the sake of the right image. This is something that the party's grass-roots workers may find hard to empathise with. At the same time, when it comes to organising rallies and shouting anti-BJP slogans, Yechury is right there with the rest.

But then, this is the new face of the CPI(M). •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

As you like it

Karnataka Janata Dal's script keeps changing as actors watch hopelessly

In the absurd drama that has been taking place in Karnataka over the last two weeks, there have been departures of characters but no defections. With elections nearing, the plot is turning into a convoluted mess.

The lead actors of the ruling Janata Dal's ongoing show are, needless to say, H.D. Deve Gowda and Ramakrishna Hegde. As the stories of their friendship and enmity keep getting rewritten, a tragi-comedian called J.H. Patel playing the role of chief minister is caught in the web woven by the two.

A flashback. The first act ended with Gowda, who had cast 18 Dal members as MPs and tried to write Hegde out of the script in 1996. He couldn't do away with Hegde's chorus boys led by R.V. Deshpande, the industry minister in Patel's Cabinet. Hegde stood in the wings writing an 'apolitical' script called the Nava Nirmana Vedike, biding for his next cue.

Patel was delivering his meaningless one-liners, giving a free hand to his ministers so that he could count on their loyalty, and whenever possible, spouted philosophy over Scotch on the rocks. None of the 112 MLAs wanted to go for a reading of Hegde's Vedike, which was filled with confusion. Patel knew he would be the biggest pawn between Gowda and Hegde but was never sure which one would finally send him off the stage.

In the second act Patel thought Hegde was the one to fear. As the latter was threatening to beckon some of the MLAs to act in a new political script titled Lok Shakti. But most of the actors were loathe to leave the show in which they were playing ministers and board chairmen.

Gowda, who had gone off to Delhi to star as Prime Minister in an even bigger show, slept through his role, got sacked and came back to Bangalore to rewrite the show. He wanted to replace Patel, preferably with his son H.D. Revanna, but without risking to end the play.

Act three began with Gowda holding parallel meetings with state JD president B.L. Shankar, his confidant C.M. Ibrahim, etc. He thought he would be backed by the strong Vokkaliga lobby. Patel, afraid of being left alone on stage, tried to hold the attention of another powerful lobby in the audience, the Lingayats, until the end of his term in 1999.

V RAJAGOPAL

Hegde, who fears losing the Lingayat audience and being blamed for prematurely ending the show, will keep it going at least until Lok Shakti opens to good reviews in March, with the BJP's backing

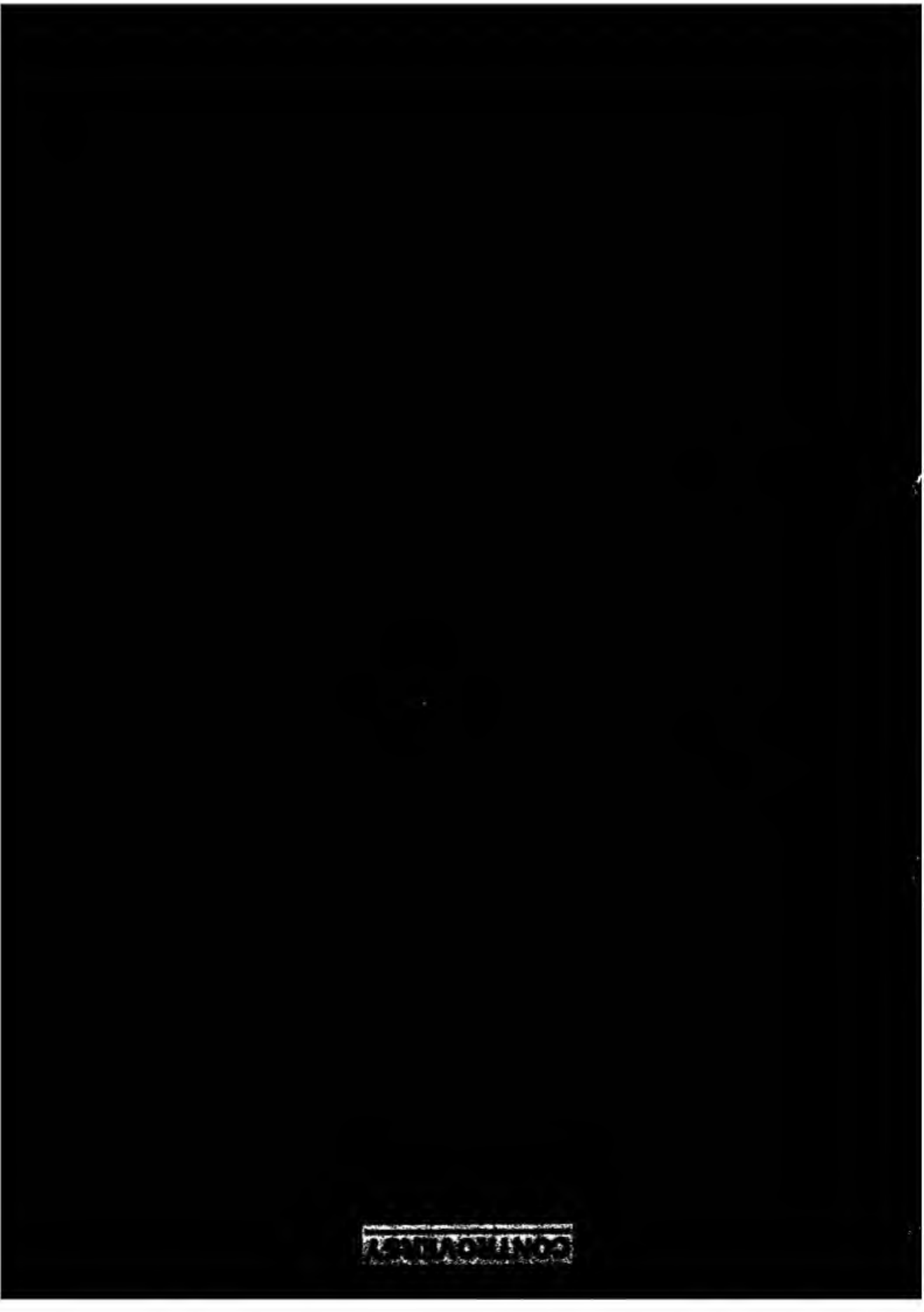
Now act four is going on. Hegde recently got a new producer called the BJP for his Lok Shakti. Six of the chorus boys led by Deshpande joined him. However, they asided to Patel that they were actually going for a reading of Vedike, which everyone had presumed to be defunct. They also promised to come back on cue to utter their lines of "confidence". They were worried that the Lingayat audience might not buy tickets for their next play if they ended the one starring Patel, the Lingayat hero.

The fifth act could well be the final one. But here's hazarding a guess at how the show will fare. Gowda is determined to continue it by casting a sizeable number of Karnataka actors as MPs and getting one of his supporters to play the chief minister, though Vokkaliga support is uncertain.

Hegde, who fears losing the Lingayat audience and being blamed for prematurely ending the show, will keep it going at least until Lok Shakti opens to good reviews in March, with the BJP's backing.

As for Patel, he will retire from the CM's role. But being a man of limited talent and ambition, he is not bothered much. He might even dramatically switch to Hegde's production with a large number of bit players to form a government based on Lok Shakti's script and support from the four BJP MLAs. •

Gauri Lankesh/Bangalore



PRADIP SAHYAL

Mulayam Singh Yadav: "We politicians are clean"

ce and warload. The question is: did the IAF need such enhanced strategic capability when it already has what it needs? Some air force officers liken it to placing a Mercedes Benz SL 600 car on the potholed roads of Barabanki; or giving fighter pilots Blue Label Scotch whisky when they are quite content with Solan No. 1.

Formal induction of the Su-30K in its 'clean-wing' version took place on 11 June, 1997, at the Lohegaon airbase at Pune in the presence of Prime Minister I.K. Gujral, defence minister Mulayam Singh Yadav and Chief of Air Staff Air Chief Marshal S.K. Sareen.

Gujral called the induction a necessary deterrence, a landmark for defence forces particularly Indo-Russian defence cooperation and emphasised, "The Su-30 is the best choice of our defence planners," and for the technical impetus it would provide for the LCA and other indigenous products. However, this bear-hug is really a goodbye to indigenisation.

Sareen took the cake by referring to the Su-30K as a "weapon of peace", an investment in stability of the subcontinent and, if you will, an extension of the Gujral doctrine, confirming the conceptual gap between the latter and Sareen's own air and space force doctrine with Su-30 as its centrepiece.

The first squadron to receive the eight two-seat Su-30s is also Sareen's own, No. 24 (Hunting Hawks) squadron. In 1978, with Sareen in command, this squadron — then equipped with MiG-21 fighter — was declared non-operational by the director air staff inspections. The newly unveiled squadron is also non-operational in the present version of the new aircraft is merely a flight demonstrator, fit for training and fly-pasts, no way any deterrent for adversaries as described by Gujral at Lohegaon. Without its underwing stations it is the world's most expensive 'advanced jet trainer' (AJT)!

The jinx has not left No. 24 squadron. Its latest casualty is the Moscow-trained Wing Commander B.N. Unnikrishnan, the squadron commander, who has suddenly but permanently been separated from his dream aircraft, Su-30, under curious circumstances.

This biggest ever arms contract with Russia makes the Bofors and HDW submarine deals kindergarten stuff. Yet bigger is the veil of silence and secrecy over the Su-30. Signed with indecent haste, several questions arise from the Sukhoi deal:

Eleven steps to Sukhoi-Rama

ASHOK VAIRE

Air Chief Marshal (retd) S.K. Kaul: Doing a volte-face

December 1993
There is no ASR for Su-27 class of aircraft. Also no need for additional pilots for a two-crew combat plane. Chief of Air Staff S.K. Kaul publicly dismisses Su-27 as "irrelevant to the IAF" during the AviaIndia air show at Bangalore.

February 1994
At a seminar held jointly by the IAF and the Confederation of Indian Industry, Kaul criticises the Russians for failing to provide critical product support to the IAF and asks CII for help.

April 1994
Kaul does a volte-face. Declares publicly that Su-27 is "very relevant" to the IAF and "much preferred to the Mirage 2000". An experts' team goes to Russia to look at the aircraft.

April 1996
IAF team led by senior Air Vice-Marshal S. Krishnaswamy visits Russia to test fly and evaluate Su-27.

3 April, 1996
The Cabinet approves procurement of the Su-30MKI (developed version of Su-27) and transfers Rs 860 crore to Russia.

• What was the pressing need for yet another class of fighter aircraft when the perfectly adequate Mirage 2000 and MiG-29 are already in service?

• Have the technology and threat environment changed in the region to trigger off a new response?

• Given our overdependence on Russian equipment, what were the compulsions in perpetuating this overreliance?

• Was the money wisely spent and what are the guarantees that the aircraft the IAF wants is the one it will eventually get?

• And finally, how were the IAF's time-tested long-term equipment planning, selection and acquisition procedures subverted?

Some answers can be culled from the Sukhoi story (*see box*: 11 steps to Sukhoi-rama). There was no need to induct another class of multi-role aircraft with a quantum jump in the radius of action from the existing 600 km to 1,500 km when the operational air doctrine of the IAF has been to keep the air space sanitised at the farthest corner of the subcontinent. Now, we're told that Mulayam Singh Yadav has accepted the Russian offer for Ilyushin 78 in-flight refuelling tankers to enhance the strike range to a staggering 5,000 km.

The IAF has wanted the in-flight refuellers since 1986 and had two aircraft — Mirage 2000 and Jaguar — fully capable and equipped for in-flight refuelling, but this capability was never exploited as it was not needed. Now, the IAF is contracting for mid-flight refuelling capability for an aircraft that should not need it anyway.

No new threat or technological changes were reported in the neighbourhood to provoke the sudden and hasty demand for a new range of fighter aircraft. In fact, Pakistan's F-16 fleet was badly hit and depleted by attrition and no new aircraft was on the horizon — neither for love, nor for money. The new Pakistan Air Chief Marshal, Pervaiz Mehdi Qureshi, has expressed concern

15 April, 1996
The BJP issues a strongly worded statement protesting the 'dubious' Su-30 deal.

13 November, 1996
The Cabinet committee on political affairs meets with Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda and endorses the previous government's decision to procure Su-30MKI.

30 November, 1996
The defence secretary signs formal contract at Irkutsk and advances another Rs 1,500 crore to Russia.

January 1997
A 50-member IAF team of pilots and technicians leave for Russia for conversion training.

March 1997
First two Su-30s are transferred to Pune for local assembly and test flight before being handed over to the IAF.

11 June, 1997
Prime Minister Gujral inaugurates the first half of IAF's squadron of Su-30s (eight aircraft).

over the disparity in frontline aircraft between India and Pakistan which has risen 7:1 in India's favour.

Given the IAF's unhappy experience in premature engine failures, product support, spares and hassles in transfer of technology for licensed production and the collapse of the Soviet/Russian aviation industry, opting for yet another hi-tech high-cost Russian weapon system has closed the door for diversifying to Western equipment.

The main compulsion for buying Russian is known to have been 'political'. Which is a euphemism for kickbacks. The money invested so far — Rs 2,380 crore — for eight dressed-up Su-27PU works out to Rs 300 crore per piece. Eventually the 40 final version aircraft would cost Rs 160 crore each which is Rs 30 to Rs 40 crore more than the Mirage 2000s and MiG-29s already in service.

Money is deemed to be wisely spent only when the weapon system becomes operationally viable. In the case of the Su-30, this will happen after nearly ten years if it happens at all given our unhappy experience with the Russians.

In the mid-Fifties, IAF evolved the concept of a balanced air force which was meshed into a long-term re-equipment plan. Before a new weapon system is introduced in service, an air staff requirement approved by the CAS is mandatory (*see box*). For a major acquisition like the Su-30, the ASR-to-induction stage may take anything from eight to ten years or more. The Su-30 is a frightening example of the procedure being thrown to the winds.

Many have criticised the way the Sukhoi has been inducted into the IAF. But the most outspoken is retired Air Marshal Brajesh D. Jayal, former AOC-in-C South West Air Command, a test pilot who has spent nearly 30 years in the policy planning directorate of Air Headquarters and Aircraft and Systems Testing Establishment (ASTE), evolving and evaluating blueprints and prototypes of future weapon system. After studying the Su-30 deal he asks whether "the cancer of corruption has finally started to corrode the IAF's institutionalised and time-tested procedures" (*see box*).

V. RAJAGOPAL

These grave violations of national security interests confirm as in the case of Bofors that when politicians are keen on fat arms deals, they can easily rope in the armed forces and the ever-obliging bureaucrats. A curious political consensus was grafted after the BJP's short-lived objections to the Su-30 deal.

On 15 April, 1996, Atal Behari Vajpayee criticised the outgoing government's decision to buy the aircraft, hinting at the possibility of huge commissions in the deal and accusing Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao of concluding "dubious deals in indecent haste and opaque manner before he is thrown out by the electorate".

On 22 April, 1996, BJP spokesperson K.R. Malkani represented to President Shankar Dayal Sharma, protesting against the "lame duck government's decision, motivated by factors totally divorced from the nation's security". He also alerted the Election Commission on this deal.

The BJP was in office for 13 days. Apparently it failed to scuttle the deal for which an advance of Rs 880 crore had already been paid by the previous government. Then there was this unprecedented leak of MoD, Air Headquarters ASR File No. S96053\1\3 of 25

DELIVERY SCHEDULE

Su-30K Phase I	May 1997	Non-operational
10 Su-30K Phase I	December 1998	Non-operational version
12 Su-30K Phase II	June 2000	Air Defence version
10 Su-30MKI Phase III	June 2001	Multirole version
Upgraded Su-30K Phase I	July 2002	Multirole
Upgraded Su-30K Phase I	June 2003	Multirole
Upgraded Su-30K Phase II	June 2004	Multirole

Chart by Niiratan Maity

March, 1996, signed by defence secretary K.A. Nambiar "soliciting cabinet approval for Sukhoi Su-30MK along with associated equipment at a total cost of Rs 6,310 crore".

Vayu, India's leading aerospace journal, referred to the controversial Sukhoi deal as the mother of all arms scandals in the country, still recovering from the Bofors fiasco. Why did the BJP guns fall silent and the UF government permitted to formally sign the contract?

According to a former air marshal, the only conclusion one can draw is that the Russians and the Sukhoi company "looked after everyone's interest".

The lesson for politicians from Bofors was to leave no tell-tale signs. On the deal Mulayam Singh Yadav made the declaration that there were no middlemen or kickbacks, "We politicians are clean." Yet, after a party meeting in Calcutta in October 1997, he threatened to reveal the names of brokers and agents who were involved in arms deals and were harassing him.

Writing about the return of middlemen in *The Observer of Business and Politics* (14 April, 1997) veteran journalist D.N. Mishra reported that Rs 550 crore advance in the Su-30 deal in April 1996 materialised during the UF government. He named S. Chaudhary (Sudhir and Rajiv of Chaudhary Brothers fame), "a known middleman of many deals" and Seema Bakula of Irkutsk (the home of the Sukhoi) as involved.

The Chaudhary brothers run an empire from their Malcha Marg office in Delhi called Eureka Sales Corporation. Eureka was the brainchild of their uncle, Baljit Kapur, once the eminence grise of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited but sacked peremptorily. His liaisons with the Soviet and French aviation industry are legion.

Mishra wrote that Rs 25 crore had been deposited in a Belize bank, a tax haven in South America.

Other names mentioned included as middlemen are Brij Mohan Gupta (of Indian Avitronics). Those who know about defence deals say the Su-30 deal involves a 17 per cent commission — 15 for India and two for Russia, amounting to Rs 1,071 crore.

At the Lohegaon induction ceremony, Yadav requested the Prime Minister to use his influence to get the next batch of 12 Su-30s delivered quickly so that a full squadron strength was in place. Since the arrival of the next batch

Gujral called the induction a necessary deterrence, a landmark for defence forces, and emphasised, "The Su-30 is the best choice of our defence planners"

The triumph of the tragedy of Su-30

The IAF and the GOI have violated basic acquisition procedures

The IAF has violated its time-tested principle of weapon system procurement, viz, first establish the need, then evolve an ASR before looking at a system in the market. No doubt an ASR has now been made, but this can only be a cover-up as such ASRs need many years of work and interaction and cannot be made in two to three years.

The IAF has violated the second principle: do not commit yourself to a combat aircraft until it has been fully developed and evaluated by ASTE. By no stretch of imagination can flying the Su-27 be considered as an evaluation of the Su-30MK weapon system, considering the changes that are envisaged. In fact, the IAF has committed itself to a weapon system that does not exist.

The IAF has violated a third principle. It has forgotten that assured product support over the weapon system's life cycle is even more crucial than the weapon system itself. It is preferable to choose a lower performance system but with assured support. It needs a brave man to guarantee such support from Russia at this time and a gullible customer to swallow it.

The latter seems to be a new trait in the IAF. It has conveniently forgotten that only a few years ago, its MiG-29 fleet was in dire straits with more than half its engines out for repairs and overhaul, most of them prematurely.

The fourth principle of carefully evaluating 'life-cycle costs' to arrive at a cost-effective procurement decision has been ignored. It has been overlooked that the primary reason for the IAF accepting erstwhile Soviet equipment was the rupee payment and easy credit terms. These advantages far outweighed the poor product support, very high life-cycle costs and poor operational availability of the weapon systems. With hard currency payment terms, the biggest attraction is now lost.

Air Marshal (retd) S.B. Joyal: the most outspoken critic of the deal

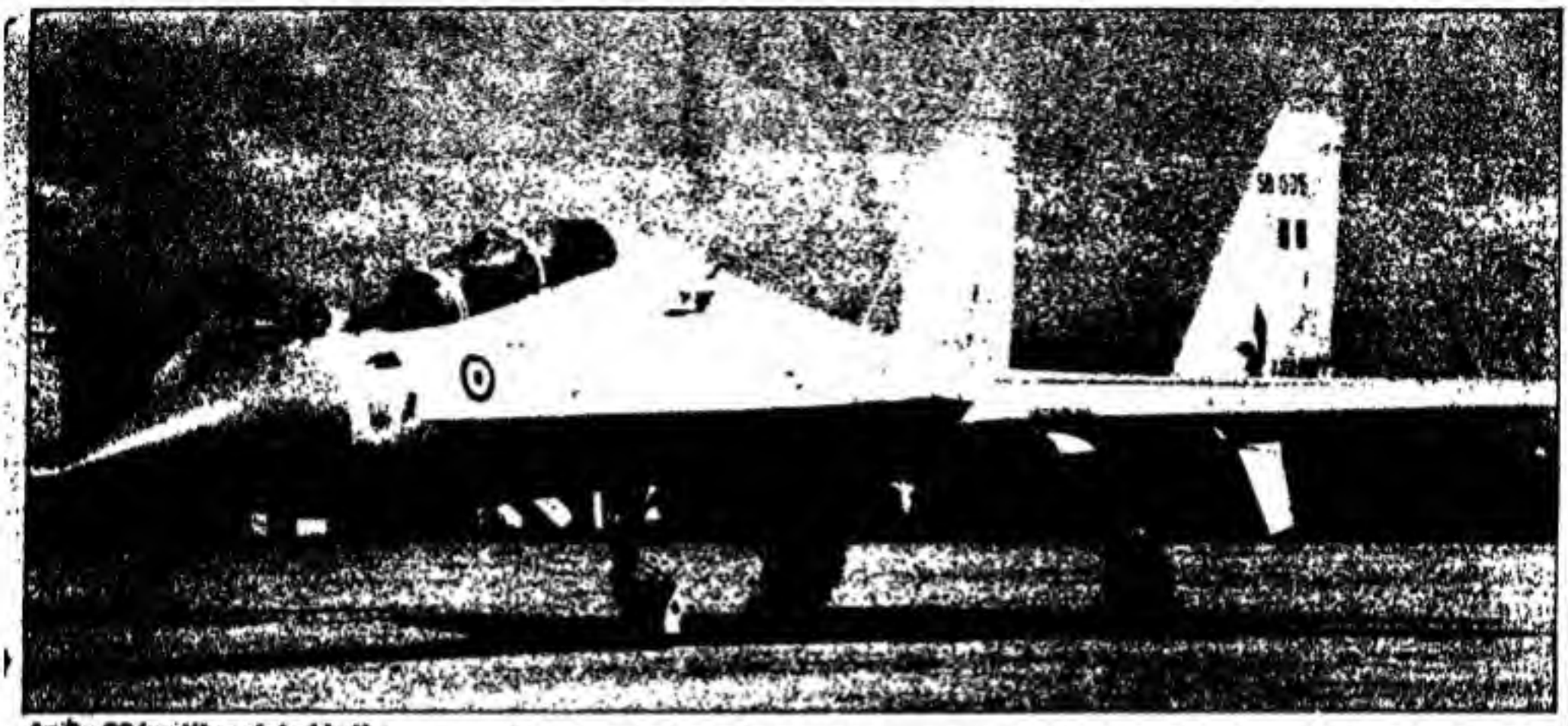
Sadly, a new attraction for the wily few has emerged! Supporting this weapon system and that too the differing variants until the final standard appears will put a very heavy demand on the IAF's maintenance budget. Not to mention the capital costs to set up repair and overhaul facilities.

The objective of the IAF to reduce multiplicity of types of aircraft has been overlooked in the face of a clear and acceptable option.

The policy to diversify combat aircraft procurement sources to prevent problems like the one that confronted the IAF after the collapse of the Soviet Union has also been overlooked.

The IAF, already short of crew to fill cockpits, will now fly two pilots in one aircraft, leaving more aircraft on the ground. Unfortunately, fighter pilots cannot be churned out overnight and cockpit shortages will become even more acute.

When no less than three successive air chiefs starting from Air Chief Marshal La Fontaine had put the AJT as the IAF's first priority and the requirement had existed from 1984 and full specifications completed in 1986, a



An Su-30 tastily painted in the national colours at a Delhi air show: clowning around

reversal by the IAF under the fourth Air Chief Marshal, S.K. Kaul, makes no sense. The current chief has not been particularly vocal on the subject while extolling the virtues of space.

Once the true import of this project starts to take its toll on the IAF budget and the magnitude of capital investments required to set up license production in India sinks in, the plan to produce the Su-30 in India will be put into cold storage. This happened in the case of MiG-29. Budgetary realities will in all probabilities also scuttle any proposal to buy one or two more squadrons outright.

The inescapable need to set up a repair and overhaul facility for the Su-30MK will emerge. The enormous capital costs will ensure no decision on this and in the interim the IAF will continue to send engines and equipment to Russia, a classic repeat of the MiG-29 story.

The IAF will then have the Mirage 2000 and the Su-30MK as its multi-role combat aircraft, both in limited numbers but with full-fledged repair and overhaul facilities set up at great capital cost but grossly underutilised because of limited squadrons.

What role have the MoD and MoD (finance) played in all this? While criticism that procedural delays by the MoD are valid (and indeed the IAF is still answering questions on the AJT procurement 12 years after the proposal was mooted), there has been a recognition that the system of checks and balances is necessary. How then did the South and North Blocks break all records in clearing this project, given all the lacunae? What happened to the checks and balances?

The tragedy of the Su-30 deal is not so much over the amount of money spent on one project or that the aircraft will not be available in its final operational form for many years to come. Or that over the years, this deal will become a millstone around the IAF's neck and a white elephant of tragic magnitude.

It is that small and selfish minds, both in and out of uniform, have conspired to destroy in one fell swoop the very foundation of professional planning and weapon procurement. •

Air Marshal B.D. Jayal

How an aircraft is acquired

Milestone	Approximate period
15-year perspective plans ◆	
Staff paper	0 year
◆	
Position paper	1 year (within Air Force)
◆	
Air Staff Target	3rd year (Continuous discussions with DRDO/HAL/NAL and refinements)
◆	
Air Staff Requirement	5th year (Evaluations, Test flying, etc.)
◆	
TNC/ PNC	10th year (MoD)
◆	
Formal contract	12th year

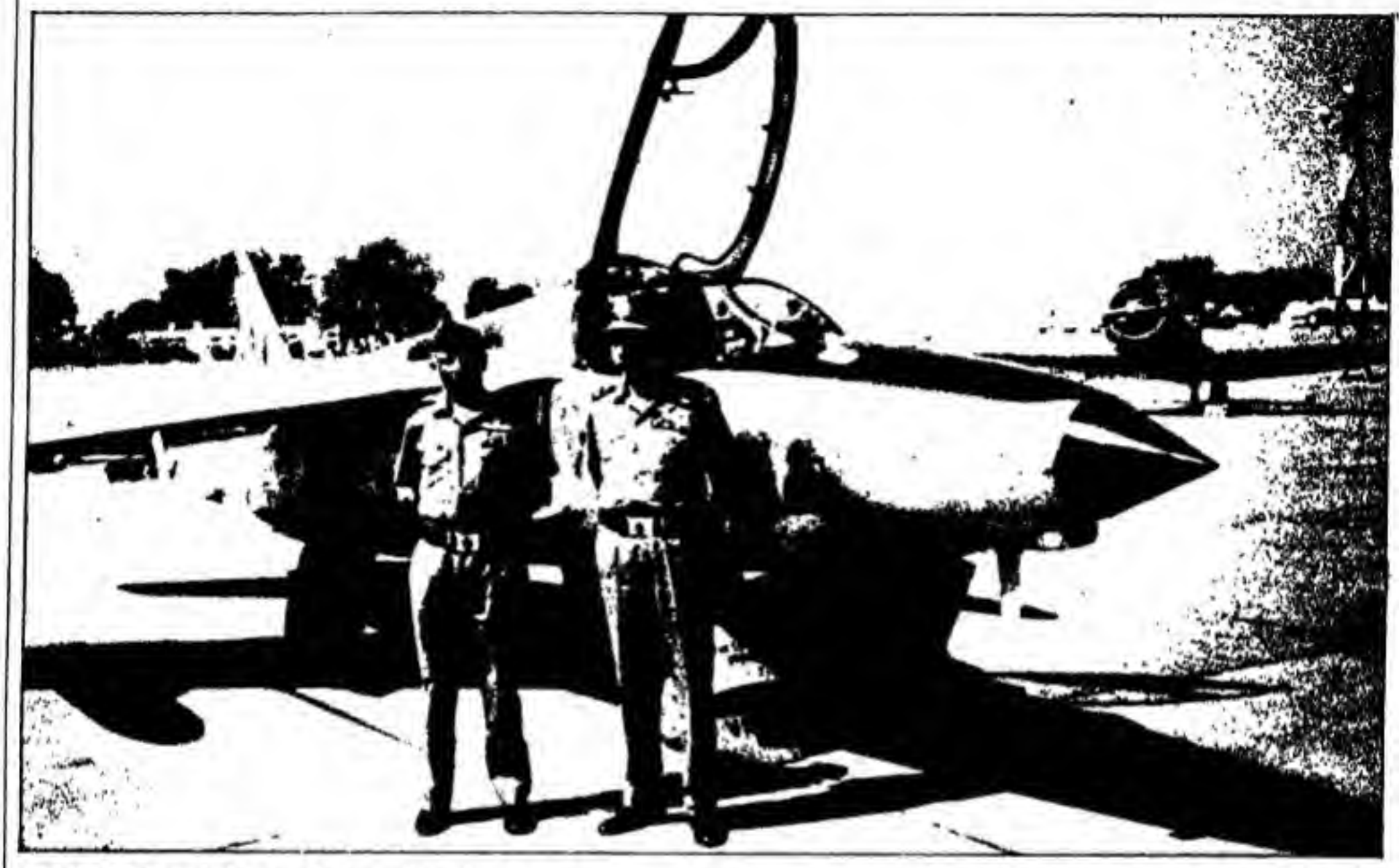
TNC: Technical Negotiating Committee **PNC**: Price Negotiating Committee **DRDO**: Defence Research and Development Organisation **HAL**: Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd **NAL**: National Aerospace Laboratory

Chart by Niratan Maity

would not operationalise the clean-wing trainer squadron, his motive, according to a retired air marshal, could only have been otherwise: big money for doubtful value.

Yadav's insistence on meeting President Boris Yeltsin postponed his visit to Moscow from June to October last year. This has cemented the so-called strategic partnership between Russia and India of which the Su-30 is the lynchpin. A new joint working group till 2010 on military technical cooperation has been formed to provide a politico-strategic dimension to the long-standing defence purchase relations between the two countries with a carry-over debt of nearly Rs 30,000 crore.

According to *Flight International* (March 1997) "Just as the byzantine Soviet empire has been torn apart by centrifugal forces, so has its aerospace industry been shattered by old style command economy." Except for Sukhoi and



MAPO-MiG, orderbooks of other military and civil sectors are dry.

The Russian Air Force has not placed order even for a single aircraft since 1991. Not surprisingly, there are reports about a scam involving dollars 231 million meant for MAPO-MiG 29 orders. And the US bid to scuttle the strategic Su-30 deal so that its own efforts to establish strategic partnership are not adversely affected has to be noted.

The Su-30 has killed the flexibility and other options of the IAF by eating up scarce funds. More aircraft and pilots will continue to be lost like the 94 crashed between April 1993 and July 1997 and 26 pilots killed between 1994 and 1996. The training cost of a fighter pilot is more than Rs 5 crore. The main reason for this catastrophic record is the failure of the IAF to be adamant about the AJT rather than succumb to the Sukhoi.

There was a variety of ways of utilising Rs 6,310 crore more wisely: plugging the Purulia-type gaps in air defence, investing in force multipliers and information technology, just to name a few. Sareen can fiddle with the brass and button of uniform and call the IAF an air and space force but he must know that leadership is not made of personal fantasies.

By paying Rs 2,380 crore, which is 30 per cent of the total cost of the Rs 6,310-crore deal, India has altered the balance of payment without altering the balance of air power in its favour. Worse, it has bought an aircraft equivalent in weight to a 40-tonne medium tank, nearly twice the size of the Canberra aircraft and without any shelter or support for it on the ground. Still worse is the question, whether any country has paid 30 per cent advance money for eight aircraft which is one-fifth of the total order for an aircraft yet to be developed.

The renowned fighter ace, retired Air Marshal Denzil Keelor (right), the elder of the famous Keelor brothers, has said that Su-30 was a political decision which the IAF will have to make the most of

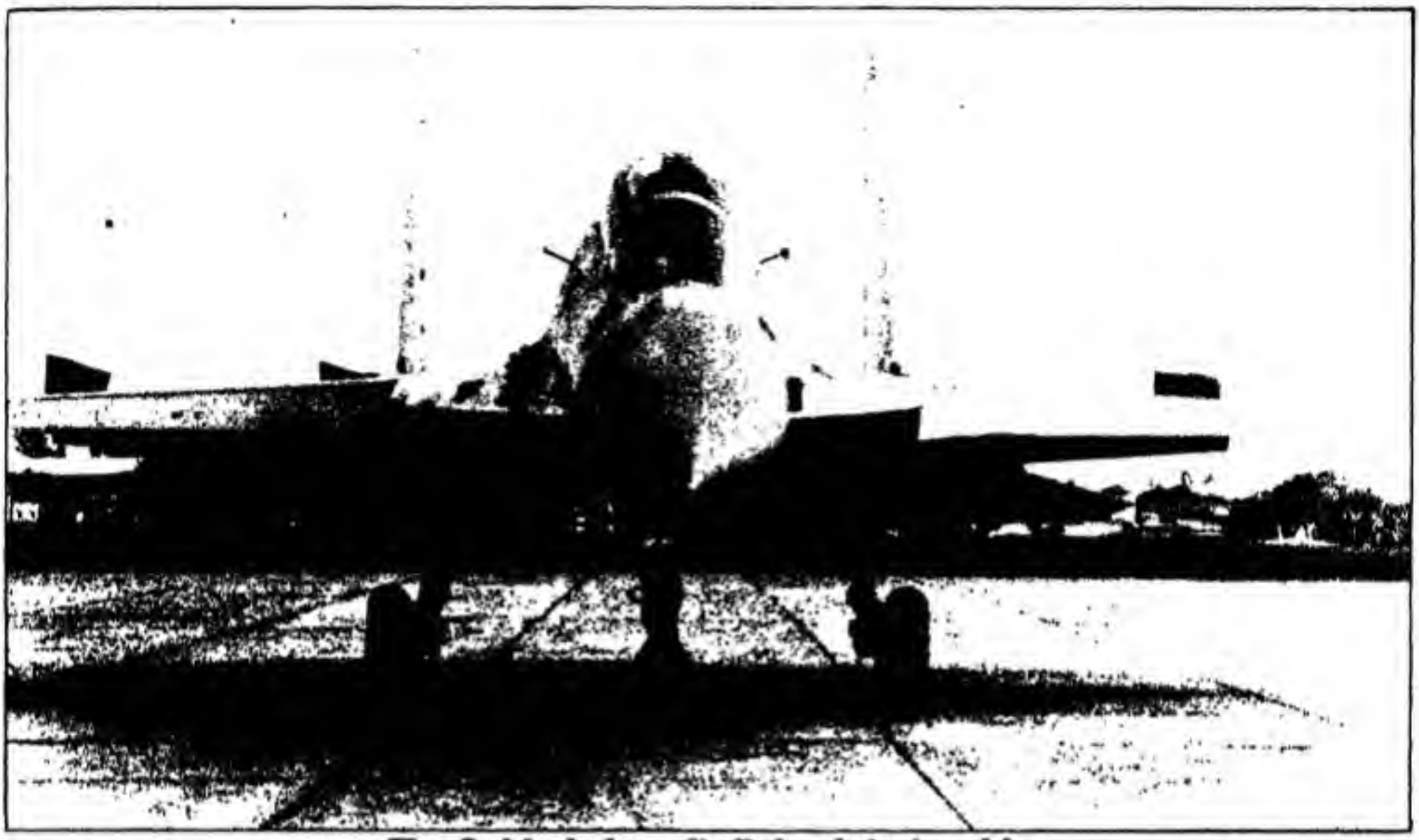
Further, it violates the rule that no equipment is to be bought from a country when it is neither fully developed nor operationally cleared

Defending the purchase of the aircraft, a senior air force officer has written that had India not bought the Su-30, it would have been doing the fly-past in Islamabad instead of New Delhi. That, according to the editor of *Vayu*, would have been the best bet for India. MoD officials insist they have clinched an excellent deal by freezing the price at 1996 levels.

The renowned fighter ace, retired Air Marshal Denzil Keelor, the elder of the famous Keelor brothers of 1965 fame has said that Su-30 was a political decision which the IAF will have to make the most of. Eric Arnett of the Stockholm Peace Research Institute remarks, "From any perspective — military, fiscal or strategic — the Su-30 is a bad deal."

But the most telling comment ironically has come from a Russian, Uri Gorbon, "With all the extras added on to the Su-27, it will mean that the Su-30MKI will not only be about one tonne heavier than the Su-27SK, with consequent penalties of warload-range but will also cost 50 per cent more. The forward stubby wings and swivelling jet exhaust will give the Indians the distinction of having the world's finest flying circus." •

Maj.-Gen. Ashok K. Mehta/New Delhi



The Sukhoi aircraft: flying into trouble

THE YOGIS AND THE COMMISSARS

Indians and Russians conspired to sign the Sukhoi deal — the Russians because they needed the money; and the Indians because the government was in league with arms agents

On 31 March 1996, a meeting took place in outgoing Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao's room in South Block. Present at the meeting were the minister of state for defence C. Mallikarjun, minister for defence research and development Suresh Pachauri, defence secretary (and currently Tamil Nadu chief secretary) K.A. Nambiar and other officials, including present Chief of Air Staff (COAS) Air Chief Marshal S.K. Sareen from the Indian Air Force (IAF).

It was a crisis management meeting. The government had a problem on its hands. The Cabinet had just tied up a deal for the purchase of 40 fighter aircraft, the Sukhoi-30, from Russia. It was to be the biggest deal in the history of the Indian Air Force.

But a newspaper had published reports citing Russian sources, alleging that kickbacks had been paid to some Indians in the Sukhoi deal. With elections round the corner, the government just couldn't afford speculation over ulterior motives in signing the Su-30 deal. The 31 March meeting was a brainstorming of bureaucrats and politicians. Obviously, the deal could not be signed; the question was: how a controversy could be prevented and the situation saved.

The COAS and his officers had already made a strong and impassioned pitch for the plane. They had argued forcefully that Pakistan had the edge over India: it was negotiating with a Western country for the sale of reconditioned Mirage-2000 aircraft. The Su-30 was a state-of-the-art, hitech aircraft with air-to-air refuelling capacity. It had everything going for it. The Air Force wanted it

So did Narasimha Rao. "But we have declared elections. How can we now announce we're buying this plane?" Rao asked officers on 31 March. The deci-

sion had to be taken before that date so that it would still fall within the financial year. Suresh Pachauri said it wasn't advisable to take the decision in a hurry.

Then Rao himself suggested a way out. "Take eight aircraft now. I will come back in June. Then in the first Cabinet meeting we hold in June, I'll clear the purchase of the rest," he said.

The meeting ended with bureaucrats leaving South Block mulling over this proposal. Negotiations—and contracts — for the purchase of aircraft run into thousands of pages and add up to hours and hours of persuasion. The proposal before the government was to buy 40 aircraft. Now this number was down to eight. As the officials waited for the lift, Nambiar smiled resignedly and told his colleagues: "So what do we do now?"

"Rewrite the contract," answered one, puzzled at the question, though it is well known that it takes upto two years to draw up a contract.

Actually the problem was not as complex as it appeared. The option of buying eight aircraft had been discussed: the proposal was that India could buy eight, then partially manufacture the rest in India.

India has had some experience of Russian aircraft. The aircraft manufacture facility at Nasik, Maharashtra, was dedicated to manufacturing Russian aircraft, specifically, the MiG-27. Since the MiG-27 programme had ended, the factory was lying idle. Of course, it was impossible for India to machine the titanium parts of the aircraft, which would have to be imported from Russia. But developing and partially manufacturing the Su-30 would take the same amount of time as buying fly-away Su-30s.

However, when the Cabinet met on 3 April, it was clear which way the wind was blowing. No one was too enamoured of the proposal for partial manufacture. As soon as the meeting started, the defence secretary proposed — in a note he'd already prepared — that India pay some amount of money for the aircraft as an advance, even though no contract had been drawn up and no papers signed. The decision to acquire all 40 in fly-away condition — or eight and then the partial manufacture route — was left to the new government.

To many present, this in itself was a surprise. The earlier note prepared by the defence secretary had sought Cabinet clearance for the outright purchase of 40 aircraft. This was held back. Instead, the defence secretary now proposed Cabinet's approval of an advance of US$ 144 million to the Russians.

His note explained that an emissary of President Yeltsin had come to India in March and had pleaded that India give the Russians an advance — elections in Russia were round the corner and the government was finding it difficult to pay the salaries of the workers of the various aviation enterprises which were working on the Su-30. If the workers were laid off, it would be difficult to produce the aircraft.

Nambiar's argument was that if the Russians got the advance, they would be able to pay salaries and would continue work at least on the eight aircraft the government was interested in buying.

The meeting didn't take long. The government decided to pay — without contracts, agreements or a bottomline — US$ 144 million to the Russians as an advance. As they trooped out after the meeting, stunned bureaucrats discussed among themselves the implications of the decision.

This was never done — normally purchase of even a small piece of equipment is accompanied by reams of paperwork. The seller is given dire warning about penal payments if he defaults in production; payments are made in stages after rigorous scrutiny.

None of this happened: the P.V. Narasimha Rao government committed the country to buying the Su-30 aircraft which, at that stage, didn't exist.

Though the government was saying all along that it was interested in partial manufacture, parallel negotiations were already on to buy all 40 aircraft.

The contract as it exists today says that partial manufacture could be considered after India had got 40—not eight — Su-30s.

This is self-evident. if the government agreed to partial manufacture, there would be no need for go-betweens.

And after the approximately Rs 7,000 crore India had committed to spend on the Su-30, costs are likely to go up. The life cycle costs of the Su-30 — its fuel demand (it is universally acknowledged to be a fuel-guzzler), test flying, maintenance — are prohibitive. The life cycle costs of Russian planes are especially high — about three to four times the capital cost of the aircraft — compared to Western aircraft, even if the initial capital cost may seem to be lower than others.

When the Narasimha Rao government bowed out and the H.D. Deve Gowda government assumed office,

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Mulayam Singh Yadav, defence minister: What P.V. Narasimha Rao had begun, Mulayam Singh Yadav eventually completed. He sought to put the stamp of legitimacy on the dubious Su-30 deal by asserting that no middlemen were involved

H.D. Deve Gowda: After his government assumed office, Gowda, as PM, was the first one to ask questions about the Su-30 deal. He wanted to know how so much advance had been paid and why the partial manufacture route had been abandoned

Gowda was the first one to ask questions about the Su-30. He wanted to know how so much advance had been paid, why the partial manufacture route had been abandoned...

Gowda's defence minister, Mulayam Singh Yadav, had to go to up to campaign for the Assembly elections soon after the Gowda government took over. The Su-30 deal was the one that needed to be finalised most urgently. The financial powers of the ministry of defence are vested in the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs (CCPA) rather than the Cabinet as discussion on defence-related projects could jeopardise secrecy. The Gowda government's CCPA comprising foreign minister I.K. Gujral, finance minister P. Chidambaram and home minister Indrajit Gupta gave the 'fitness certificate' to the contract. When Mulayam Singh Yadav returned from his dusty UP sojourn, he signed the papers. The Su-30 was both on board, and now, above board.

Mulayam Singh Yadav formally signed the contract in Moscow in November 1996, after he'd been given an unprecedented audience with President Yeltsin. Meanwhile, Russian newspapers, hungry for scoops, published reports that not only had India bailed out Russia's aviation industry, but also, that "8 to 10 per cent commission for Indian agents and 2 per cent for the Russian agents" was involved.

Who were the people interested in avoiding the partial manufacture route and were pressing for the purchase of 40 fly-away aircraft?

Here is a dramatis personae:

• **Air Chief Marshal S.K. Kaul:** From arguing that Russian product support was unreliable and that the Su-30 family of aircraft was 'irrelevant to India's air doctrine', Kaul surprised everybody by producing an Air Staff Requirement (ASR) for a Sukhoi within a year — telescoping a procedure that takes upto three to five years.

• **P.V. Narasimha Rao:** Articulate and clever, he led everyone to believe that he — and principal secretary A.N. Verma — were in favour of partial Indian manufacture. But he was the one who left the door open for the final induction of all 40 aircraft.

• **Air Marshal S.K. Sareen:** At meetings, Sareen was the strongest, most strenuous votary of the Russian Su-30. He was the one who argued that if India didn't get the aircraft, it would fall behind Pakistan. This was when everyone knew that the features of the Sukhoi are over-sophisticated for an India-Pakistan war.

• **C. Mallikarjun:** While his colleague, Suresh Pachauri, was arguing for partial indigenous production, Mallikarjun was lobbying the Russians to buttress Narasimha Rao's hidden agenda. He was the one who told the Russian defence establishment that the Chaudhary brothers must be kept in the picture (*see later*).

Air Chief Marshal S.K. Kaul: Did the proverbial volte-face. Started by arguing that the Su-30 family of aircraft was 'irrelevant to India's air doctrine'. Ended by producing an Air Staff Requirement (ASR) for Sukhoi within a year

P.V. Narasimha Rao: Led everyone to believe that he and principal secretary A.N. Verma were in favour of partial Indian manufacture. But he, as the PM, was the one who left the door open for the final induction of all 40 aircraft

Air Marshal S.K. Sareen: the strongest votary of [illegible] argued that if India didn't [illegible] aircraft, it would fall behind Pakistan. This was when everyone knew that Sukhoi was over-sophisticated for an India-Pakistan war

• **Rajeev and Sudhir Chaudhary:** Better known as the Chaudhary brothers. Defence agents, but they have many commercial interests, especially in Israel. Often represent more than one company in the same deal, helping all the parties to reach an agreement.

The brothers have been agents for the Russians for at least eight years. While there are other defence agents operating in India and selling products to the government, the Chaudhary brothers' *modus operandi* is simple — they simply bribe.

They have a small operational set-up — just themselves, two assistants, and

THE WAIVED CLAUSE

The Government of India has a standard clause in all its defence equipment purchase contracts, barring arms agents. This clause was waived in the Su-30 purchase, reportedly at the insistence of the Russians. Here is what the clause says:

• "Seller hereby confirms that it has not paid or it will pay no commissions, fees or any such charges to pay any agent in connection with the award and execution of this contract.

• "Should it subsequently be proved that such a commission, fees or any other charges have been paid contrary to the foregoing, the Buyer shall be entitled to terminate the contract forthwith and also the provisions of the termination clause shall apply.

• "The Buyer shall also be entitled to recover from the Seller an amount equal to the commission, fees or any such charges proved to have been paid." •

relatives in London and Moscow — which has grown bigger and bigger in the last ten years. They have enormous fixed assets — a 23-acre farmhouse, expensive city property, till recently a flat in London, and they entertain at two of Delhi's most expensive five-star hotels. Yet, they've managed to escape government's scrutiny so far.

They were involved in the purchase of the 152-mm howitzers, the T-72 tanks, and have interests in ELTA, an Israeli company specialising in electronic equipment for counter-insurgency warfare.

They got minister of state for defence Mallikarjun to lobby in their favour with the Russian defence minister Kokoschin and the Rosvooruzhenie chief, Alexander Kotelykin.

• **Mulayam Singh Yadav:** What P.V. Narasimha Rao had begun, Mulayam Singh Yadav completed. What is more, he sought to put the stamp of legitimacy on the Su-30 deal by asserting that there were no middlemen.

• **Vinod Rai, joint secretary (air):** All acquisitions for the Air Force had to be processed and cleared by him. Was a good friend of the Chaudhary brothers.

• **Officials from Rosvooruzhenie:** Alexander Kotelykin, then chief of the apex Russian organisation controlling defence production, lobbied as hard for the Sukhoi as he did for the Chaudhary brothers. He met P.V. Narasimha Rao in New York when the latter went to address the United Nations General Assembly. He was instructed to deal through Sudhir Chaudhary and clear as many contracts as possible before the May elections in India.

Boris Yeltsin: bailed out by India

Although the Russians were grateful beyond measure for the Sukhoi contract, which came as a windfall, not everyone in Russia was happy, least of all, rivals of the Chaudhary brothers.

Some newspapers got confidential telexes from Russia, citing incidents of how rules were bent to ensure it was easier for the Chaudhary brothers to clinch the contract.

Here is how it was done:

• The government of India has a rule that no equipment which is not in service in the country of its origin can be purchased by the Indian government. In this case, an advance was paid without a contract and for an aircraft that didn't exist.

• The no-agent-permitted clause and its severe penalties were withdrawn at the Russians' insistence as 'not applicable to us'.

• The Indo-Russian defence cooperation introduced a clause that there would be no penalties for late deliveries.

• When a ministry of defence official involved in the negotiations was asked how a project which began as partial Indian manufacture after an initial purchase of eight aircraft turned into a deal to buy 40 in fly-away condition outright, the answer he gave was: "It was all subterfuge".

The Su-30 deal has violated so many rules and involves a loss of so much money that it will take five Joint Parliamentary Committees to work out the losses to India. It should, at the very least, be referred to a Public Accounts Committee. But will the next Parliament do this? •

Sunday's investigative team/New Delhi

RAJIV SHUKLA

One-man show

That is what S.S. Gill is accused of running at Prasar Bharati

Newspapers are now filled with stories of S.S. Gill — the new Prasar Bharati CEO. If one goes by the number of headlines he's hogging, Gill seems to be another T.N. Seshan in the making. In most reports, he is being projected as a dictator and as a man with strange ideas who is not aware of today's television. Even Prime Miniser I.K. Gujral is trying to defend himself when Gill becomes the topic of private conversations.

Is Gill actually as bad as he is being made out to be? It seems that most of this propaganda is being launched from inside Mandi House. A number of junior officers are feeding the press. Confidential discussion between DD officials and Gill is being leaked to the press on the same day.

Some people are not at all comfortable with Gill's ways. He wants everybody to be in office by 9.30 am sharp. And he's pulling up the late-comers. Gill points out that there are people who are opposed to him because he is not letting them make money on the side by exploiting their position in DD.

But the Prasar Bharati CEO has initiated impressive changes. In the last four months, corruption in DD has come down remarkably. The programme quality is improving and Gill has roped in 40 new serials from leading producer-directors who had earlier refused to come to DD because of the shabby treatment meted out by some officials.

The newly-appointed Prasar Bharati board will soon be taking a decision to lower DD's advertisemet tariff. The idea was mooted by Gill after it was found that a large chunk of DD's advertisements were going to private television channels who were offering lower rates and other incentives.

On the other hand, in order to have an impressive bottomline, DD had made its advertisement rates so steep that medium-sized advertisers had to withdraw from the government-owned channel. Gill's new decision will no doubt spell trouble for private channels as around Rs 400 crores are being mopped up by them. If DD's rates are lowered, some of these advertisers are likely to come back to DD because of its phenomenal reach.

Regarding privatisation of DD3, Gill has decided not to let foreigners come near DD. Privatising DD3 with the help of Indian broadcasters is a question to be taken up by the broadcasting authority.

The election fever is rising and this time DD will beam short capsules to educate voters. It will caution them against defectors, criminals and corrupt politicians. Slogans are being written by eminent people like Gulzar. One slogan is: *Jo apne dal ka na hua, woh desh ka kya hoga*. Another slogan is: *Mailon ko mat chhuo, tum bhi mailey ho jaoge*.

In order to beef up the quality of in-house programming, Prasar Bharati will be importing equipment worth Rs 150 crore which will include 350 VTR and 210 cameras. Gill is also persuading cable operators to improve DD's picture quality. According to him, DD's images are as good as any satellite channel. But they lose resolution at the cable operators' end.

Gill has other plans up his sleeves. DD 2 will be developed as a channel for the elite. The style of news is also being changed. Less importance will be given to political news which may create controversy in political circles and Parliament.

But Gill is adamant.

S.S. Gill (inset) and Mandi House: uneasy relationship

The Simmer of Discontent

BJP workers are grumbling at the way tickets have been distributed

Although campaigning has begun in right earnest, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) camp is far from being in order. There are no statements of dissent, no exodus from the party, not even rebel candidates. But a revolt is simmering under the surface in the BJP. This has entirely to do with the way tickets have been given.

By and large, the BJP has relied on the 'sitting-getting' formula. This means that those MPs, many who were first time MPs in 1989 and 1991, have been renominated. There are many whose image in the constituency isn't particularly good. In parliamentary party meetings, there has been talk of replacing some candidates, raising the hopes of others. But the sitting candidates have been retained.

Take Vinay Katiyar. He was representing Faizabad, and unfurled the banner of revolt against the BJP, taking up cudgels on behalf of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). The BJP considered dropping Vinay Katiyar from Faizabad but has retained him on the list.

Gangacharan Rajput's renomination from Hamirpur was another surprise. Rajput has been closer to the Janata Dal — identifying closely with the movement of backward class MPs, despite warnings from the BJP — and even floated a forum of backward class MPs. However, apparently the BJP's displeasure was cosmetic. Having realised that he is a winning candidate, Rajput has been renominated from Hamirpur.

Oddly enough, despite the huge margin by which he won (60,000 votes in the last elections) in a difficult constituency, workers are not terribly happy about Jagmohan's renomination. According to BJP sources, the central party was warned that workers would be half-hearted about Jagmohan's candidature. This has been disregarded.

The party was also considering a suggestion that Sunderlal Patwa be moved, changing his constituency from Chhindwara to Hoshangabad. It was generally assumed that Sartaj Singh, the sitting BJP MP from Hoshangabad, will not be able to defeat a Congress heavyweight like Arjun Singh. However, Sartaj Singh has been renominated from Hoshangabad.

Has the BJP been seized by a deathwish?

Maybe not. But many are deeply disappointed at the path of least resistance the BJP has taken.

Ajit Singh broke the alliance with BJP and announced he would be fighting along with the Congress. Privately, he has vowed to friends that he may not win a single seat himself, but he would make sure the BJP didn't win any either

It is not just the BJP which is unhappy with itself. Its allies are also unhappy at the way tickets have been given.

The alliance with Lakshmi Parvathi has broken down in Andhra Pradesh, though there are some in the party who feel this is not a bad thing, considering that the party now has the option of doing a post-poll deal with Chandrababu Naidu.

But what has badly damaged the BJP is the breakdown of the negotiations with Ajit Singh, which will bring down their tally in UP.

In the last election, the BJP lost 18 to 20 seats in the western UP belt because they fought against Ajit Singh. The Jat sentiment was divided between its loyalty to Charan Singh's son and its faith in the BJP. As a result, the vote got divided and several Congress candidates got through.

Realising this, Atal Behari Vajpayee worked long and hard on Ajit Singh, trying to persuade him to do a deal with the

The BJP leadership: under pressure

BJP. Through Satpal Malik who was the go-between, a tentative understanding was reached between Ajit Singh and the BJP. The former wanted six seats. He might have settled for three. He wanted to contest Baghpat himself, wanted Virendra Verma to contest from Kairana and wanted Saharanpur for Rashid Masood.

Talks were held between him and Vajpayee, Kalyan Singh, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat and Rajnath Singh. Shekhawat was particularly happy at the prospective deal: he would have made use of Ajit Singh in the Assembly elections in October to win over the Jats of Rajasthan.

However, when this matter came up in the election committee, L.K. Advani put his foot down. He said he had already committed the Baghpat seat to Som Pal.

Vajpayee told Advani he would persuade Som Pal to stand down. "*Woh saat janam mein bhi Ajit Singh ko nahin hara payange* (He will never be able to defeat Ajit Singh)," said Vajpayee. Further, he told the election committee that the best course was to bring Som Pal into the Rajya Sabha, which is what the party would have to do any way.

But no one listened. Ajit Singh broke the alliance with BJP and announced he would be fighting along with the Congress. Privately, he has vowed to friends that he may not win a single seat himself, but he would make sure the BJP didn't win any either.

Because it could not give away one seat, the BJP has probably lost eight.

The other group which the BJP was exulting about was the Loktantrik Congress which has revolted openly. Jagdambika Pal wanted a ticket for his wife. Harishanka Tewari wanted one for his brother. The BJP turned down both requests saying that in their party '*bhai-bhatijavad*' was not followed.

And that was the end of the alliance.

Where does all this leave the BJP?

Ramakrishna Hegde has struck an alliance with the BJP but isn't too happy about it because the BJP hasn't given the Lok Shakti any seats outside Karnataka. George Fernandes is fuming at the way the BJP has sidelined anti-Laloo elements in Bihar (Ravishankar Prasad, a young lawer who was in the forefront of the movement against the fodder scam hasn't been given a ticket), thus diluting the anti-Laloo crusade. The Samata Party hasn't set up a candidate against Ram Vilas, and unless the BJP does, it will be giving away the Hajipur seat to the Janata Dal on a platter.

On the whole, the BJP hasn't endeared itself to anyone by ticket distribution. It will have to strain to keep its flock from straying later. •

Aditi Phadnis/New Delhi

The crowd of four

All political groupings are evenly matched in Tamil Nadu

All political parties in Tamil Nadu seem to want the cake and eat it too. And at the same time they are trying to be one up on their rivals. No wonder, because it is Parliament election time and those who get maximum seats from Tamil Nadu will ultimately call the shots in future. Both the ruling United Front (UF) pillars the DMK and the TMC, along with minor Left parties like the CPI and the CPI(M) — and with Janata Dal tossed in — want a share of the 39 seats in the fray in Tamil Nadu.

This time round, the Jayalalitha-led AIADMK-BJP Opposition had a tough time over seat sharing. The crux of the issue is that the AIADMK-BJP alliance is almost certain to make a dent in the prospects of the DMK-TMC combine, who are unlikely to repeat the 1996 poll sweep when they won all the 39 seats from Tamil Nadu.

Initially, there was a month-long silence from TMC chief G.K. Moopanar before he made up his mind to continue the alliance with the DMK. However, Moopanar has made it clear that he will not part with a single seat and will contest all the 20 seats he won last time. M. Karunanidhi was in a fix, he had to accommodate the CPI(M) and may be the Janata Dal too, from his share of 17 seats, while two seats were to be given to the CPI.

Karunanidhi decided to be magnanimous and gave the Coimbatore seat to the CPI(M). It was a sitting seat of the DMK, but the party realised that after the Coimbatore riots, the Hindus had deserted the DMK. But, apparently, the CPI(M) was not happy with Coimbatore alone and wanted a "fair seat-sharing formula". Said CPI(M) state secretary N. Sankaraiah: "Both Karunanidhi and Moopanar are complacent that a situation similar to 1996 prevails. Things have changed vastly, you cannot underestimate the Jayalalitha-BJP combine."

Sankaraiah feels that the support of the CPI(M) is necessary in at least six constituencies to give "a fitting reply to the corrupt and fundamentalist combination". Later, the CPI(M) state committee decided to go it alone to contest from six constituencies, which would definitely cut into the DMK-TMC vote-bank.

G.K. Moopanar and M. Karunanidhi: thinking of post-poll alliances with Sonia a

This time round, the AIADMK-BJP alliance is almost certain to make a dent in the prospects of the DMK-TMC combine, who are unlikely to repeat the 1996 poll sweep when they won all the 39 seats from Tamil Nadu

The CPI was also peeved about the fact that the DMK took away the Sivakasi constituency, their sitting seat, thus leaving them with only one constituency to contest. In the 1996 elections, the CPI candidate won from Sivakasi with the smallest margin in the state. Karunanidhi's *bete noire* V. Gopalasami is contesting from Sivakasi on a MDMK ticket like last time. But this time round, he has the support of the AIADMK-BJP combine and being a local man it would be a cakewalk for Gopalasami.

The last thing Karunanidhi wants is to see Gopalasami in Parliament and this is perhaps the only reason why he wanted a DMK man instead of a CPI candidate to contest from Sivakasi. Till last minute, Karunanidhi tried to put up Tamil superstar Sharat Kumar against Gopalasami. But Sharat Kumar himself was unwilling to be sacrificed at the altar and he moved over to the neigbouring Tirunelveli, where he is sure to win as a

DMK candidate.

However, the DMK-CPI(M) imbroglio over seat allocation came as windfall for the CPI as finally Karunanidhi had to relent and was forced to give back Sivakasi to the CPI. Gopalasami must have felt elated, but his euphoria was short-lived. Karunanidhi engineered the

BJP respectively

defection of three top MDMK men close to Gopalasami — Pon Muthuramalingam, Madurakantam Armugam and Thangavelu to the DMK. Although, a shaken Gopalasami has been trying to make light of the split in the party, sections of his partymen are upset over the alliance with the BJP. Gopalasami himself is upset with Jayalalitha for giving importance to the BJP and PMK in the AIADMK-led front.

Unmindful of being "let down by the DMK-TMC" combine, the two jilted UF constituents in the state — the CPI(M) and Janata Dal — seem to have managed to have formed a front by roping in Pudiya Tamizhagam, floated by Dr K. Krishnasami, MLA and president of the Devendrakula Vellalar Federation. Dr K. Krishnasami who has pockets of schedule caste vote-bank in the southern part of the state is trying to emerge as the Kanshi Ram of Tamil Nadu politics. Said a top CPI(M) leader: "The TMC and Moopanar played dirty. The TMC does not possess that much electoral clout and this time they would be lucky if they get ten seats. Both Moopanar and Karunanidhi are clearly thinking of a post-poll alliances with Sonia Gandhi and BJP respectively." The

Jayalalitha: sitting pretty

CPI(M) feels that with the help of Dr K. Krishnasami they may be able to garner more than 60,000 votes in each constituency and thus spoil the chances of the DMK-TMC combine, as this time around the winning margins of any front is going to be waffer-thin.

And the TNCC front, which flexing its muscles in the wake of Sonia Gandhi's maiden election campaign at Sriperambudur and having the UCPI as one of its partners, is keeping its door open to accommodate last minute entrants. The Congress(I) has no real chance in a four-cornered electoral battle in Tamil Nadu and is expected only to help the TMC candidates in constituencies where they are weak. Even though the TNCC president Thangabalu says Sonia Gandhi will campaign again in Tamil Nadu, people don't believe it. Leave alone Sonia Gandhi, none of its front-ranking leaders are willing to campaign for the Congress in Tamil Nadu.

Meanwhile, Jayalalitha is sitting pretty. The AIADMK is contesting from 22 seats, more than any other party in the state, and has also set apart 17 seats for its allies: five each for the BJP, MDMK and PMK and one each for Subramanian Swamy and Vazhapadi Ramamurthy. In private, Jayalalitha is gushing and feels there is an anti-DMK wave in the state and even if the combine gets more than five seats, it will spell trouble for Karunanidhi.

Apparently, Jayalalitha sees the BJP as her best bet for all corruption cases pending against her to be either withdrawn or closed. She has risked her political career and has even openly and brazenly attacked Sonia Gandhi, which even Karunanidhi who has more reasons to hate Sonia has not done so far.

So the stage is set for a four-cornered electoral battle in Tamil Nadu. While Karunanidhi and Moopanar have rejected the CPI(M) appeals for allotment of seats, Jayalalitha derided the DMK-TMC for not being able to accommodate its allies. Moreoever, she pointed out that while earlier the DMK-TMC combine had said the alliance was "a hot pack ready to be served to the people, it has now left the CPI(M) and Janata Dal dissatisfied". But this has not caused much worry to the DMK-TMC combine. Because they seem to be convinced that their vote-bank is intact and no party can erode it. •

Sreedhar Pillai/Madras

HOME TRU

SNAPS INDIA

"I have struggled for you so far almost 18 hours per day since I took over as the CM. Now is the time for you to repay me in full for all my labour. Please pay my daily wages...in the form of your continued support."

This was the plea of Nara Chandrababu Naidu, convenor of the United Front, at a recent rally in Hyderabad. That set the tone for the UF rally, at the Nizam's College Ground, which failed to achieve little except bringing leaders of the coalition together.

The fact that the UF meet came close on the heels of the Sonia Gandhi show at the same venue hardly helped matters. There were far fewer people, and far lesser excitement. West Bengal chief minister Jyoti Basu was the only one who held the attention of the crowd. Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral and Andhra Pradesh chief minister Chandrababu Naidu had to actually cut short their speeches as people began to leave.

The only 'plus' for the coalition partners meeting in Hyderabad was the Left parties agreeing to a "common manifesto" for the UF. It was once again Jyoti Basu who 'steered' the meeting of the core committee to impress upon his comrades the need for a UF manifesto.

While this was welcome news, the meet as a whole was certainly not what the doctor had ordered for the UF leaders, the Andhra CM in particular. In the summer of 1996, when Chandrababu Naidu came into his own, he was the man of the moment, driven by his dream to cobble together a coalition of regional parties. In the winter of 1997-98, as the United Front struggles to regain control at the Centre, Naidu is still very much in the thick of things. But the spark seems to have gone out of the UF convenor's efforts to get the rickety coalition back on the rails.

Ever since the dissolution of Parliament in November '97, Naidu has, for all practical purposes, shifted political base from Delhi to Hyderabad. The Andhra CM has been quick to get down to the business of preparing for an election that no one really wants. For this, he has been putting in those extra hours and slogging it out.

Although the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) appears to be on terra firma in Andhra Pradesh, its three-cornered fight with the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) could pose some tough questions for Naidu and his team. Particularly because the Andhra CM has made quite a few enemies since taking over the late N.T. Rama Rao's mantle.

Lakshmi Parvathi remains a sworn enemy. And some from the NTR family are ready to jump on to the BJP bandwagon. Another troublespot for Naidu could be Renuka Chowdhury, the formidable lady of Banjara Hills, who is now eyeing a Lok Sabha seat.

A hostile anti-Naidu group comprises farmers and government employees. This group has grown increasingly visible and vocal in its protests and *padyatras* against Naidu's economic reforms. It fears that if the TDP wins the parliamentary polls comfortably, the CM would go ahead with his economic-reforms programme as per the dictates of the World Bank.

In his effort to salvage the state's economy and stress industrialisation, Naidu has lost quite a bit of popularity among certain sections. "Naidu had successfully combated the shadow of NTR in the 1996 elections, but now he has to face the anger of NTR's fans for withdrawing their subsidised rice and farm power," observes veteran socialist leader Changal Reddy.

'Development' and the 'penalty one has to pay for development' are the two opposite ends of the Naidu scale in Andhra Pradesh. 'Our Naidu's Achievements' read the colourful booklets published by the government to promote the party and its leader. And it is the image of a dynamic, computer-savvy leader that the state and party machinery, backed by its public relations agency, has been trying to hard-sell. Naidu has even

THS

With the United Front failing to make an impact in Andhra Pradesh, Chandrababu Naidu is desperate to project the image of a successful CM

The public response to the United Front in Andhra Pradesh is lukewarm; the Congress is riding a Sonia wave; and the BJP is quietly plotting its way to power. So, Chandrababu Naidu, Andhra CM and UF convenor, faces a stern test

been dubbed the CEO of AP All this has in general, gone down well with the younger generation, the women, and the urban professional strata

At the grass-roots level, the training camps for TDP legislators, zilla parishad presidents and other party workers have gathered momentum The Rs 1000-crore Janmabhoomi programme is well underway

While the entire TDP poll campaign revolves around Chandrababu Naidu, the Telugu tinsel town will add to the star value Leading the glamour stakes is Jaya Prada who draws more crowds than the CM Several other younger stars and starlets are also expected to throw their weight behind the TDP campaign

In a predictable techno-turn, the electronic media is playing a vital role in Naidu's campaign The TDP chief has already enlisted the support of ETV, Gemini, Siticable and In Cable to widen his network

The focus of Chandrababu Naidu's campaign is on some select measures he has initiated since he took over in 1995 The girl-child scheme is a major draw Rs 5,000 is deposited in the name of each newborn child was the theme of this project, which had been discontinued due to financial constraints and is now being revived The non-financial benefits for the backward segments and the classification of the Scheduled Castes into Malas and Madigas is also something that the TDP is highlighting Naidu has also reached out to the minority sections by providing 'unquestioned funds' for construction of mosques and churches

While Naidu's industrial drive and progressive ways have attracted many, his emphasis on economic reform has also alienated many The BJP and the Congress are eager to cash in on this Unless he wins all the sitting seats, there is no guarantee that the TDP government would survive the wrath of the party in power (the Congress or BJP) at the Centre Although he says UF will return to power, there is no confidence or conviction in his speeches, says an IAS officier of Mahboobnagar district

The public response to the UF in Andhra Pradesh is lukewarm, the Congress is riding a Sonia wave, and the BJP is quietly plotting its way to power So, N Chandrababu Naidu, Andhra CM and UF convenor, faces a tough test •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

GETTING EVEN

The anatomy of Jalappa's ire

It was the hardest decision R.L. Jalappa had to take, and characteristically, he took it unflinchingly. He resigned from his ministership, the United Front, the Janata Dal, and then announced he had joined the Congress. The Congress has got an assured seat. The Janata Dal has lost a loyal soldier.

All because of one man: H.D. Deve Gowda.

The Janata Dal in Bangalore knew this was coming more than ten days ago. The state leadership had met to decide nominations. Jalappa got up at this meeting to speak. He spoke for more than 30 minutes without interruption, a rare occurrence in a party which has been remarkably even-handed about heckling its leaders when they speak, be it Prime Ministers or party presidents.

In the presence of H.D. Deve Gowda, Jalappa recalled all the wrongs he had put up with, all the humiliations he had suffered. One by one he recounted them all, from the time Deve Gowda invited him to become a minister in the central cabinet and then offered him the post of minister of state for home. Jalappa told the gathering how he, a person of seniority and experience, had returned home from Rashtrapati Bhavan to despatch his resignation to Gowda, spitting at the offer which was nothing more than a measly bribe.

Jalappa then told the meeting how Deve Gowda and his sons had tried to sabotage his by-election in Dodda Ballarpur. In that election, one of Deve Gowda's sons had supported a rebel against Jalappa. 'You can't treat the state as if it is your family property. I've been a revenue minister, I've been a textile minister. It isn't as if I've lived off the fat of the land.I too have raised resources for Karnataka," Jalappa said angrily.

H.D. Deve Gowda was very cool. He listened quietly. Then he suggested that Jalappa might have got it wrong. "Why don't you meet my sons in camera and thrash things out with them?" he offered.

'Not on your life' replied Jalappa. "you didn't want me in Karnataka. But I will show you that I can stay in Karnataka despite you."

The doughty politician then got up and left the meeting. A few days later, he announced he was joining the Congress.

With Deve Gowda breathing down his neck and Hegde consorting with his enemy, Jalappa found he had really no option. He had to make up his mind and fast

From the time that he walked out of the JD meeting to the time he joined the Congress, Jalappa was racked by indecision and anxiety.

He had decided to throw in his lot with Ramakrishna Hegde and the Lok Shakti. Hegde was holding talks with both the Congress and the BJP. Jalappa was almost certain that Hegde would plump for the Congress and its secular tradition, rather than go to the BJP.

Almost certain? May be not, but Jalappa hoped that Hegde would choose the Congress rather than the BJP. Himself a determined critic of the BJP, Jalappa was one of the three ministers in Gujral's government who argued loudly and staunchly for the dismissal of the BJP when the BSP withdrew support to the Kalyan Singh government. Jalappa is an old-fashioned secularist who is all for the appeasement of the minorities. For him there is no compromise on this matter.

But then Hegde began to hold serious talks with the BJP. With Deve Gowda breathing down his neck and Hegde consorting with his enemy, Jalappa found he had really no option. He had to make up his mind and fast. He made contact with that archetypal gentleman of the Congress, Oscar Fernandes. And before he had time to reconsider, he was in the Congress.

What will this do to Karnataka politics?

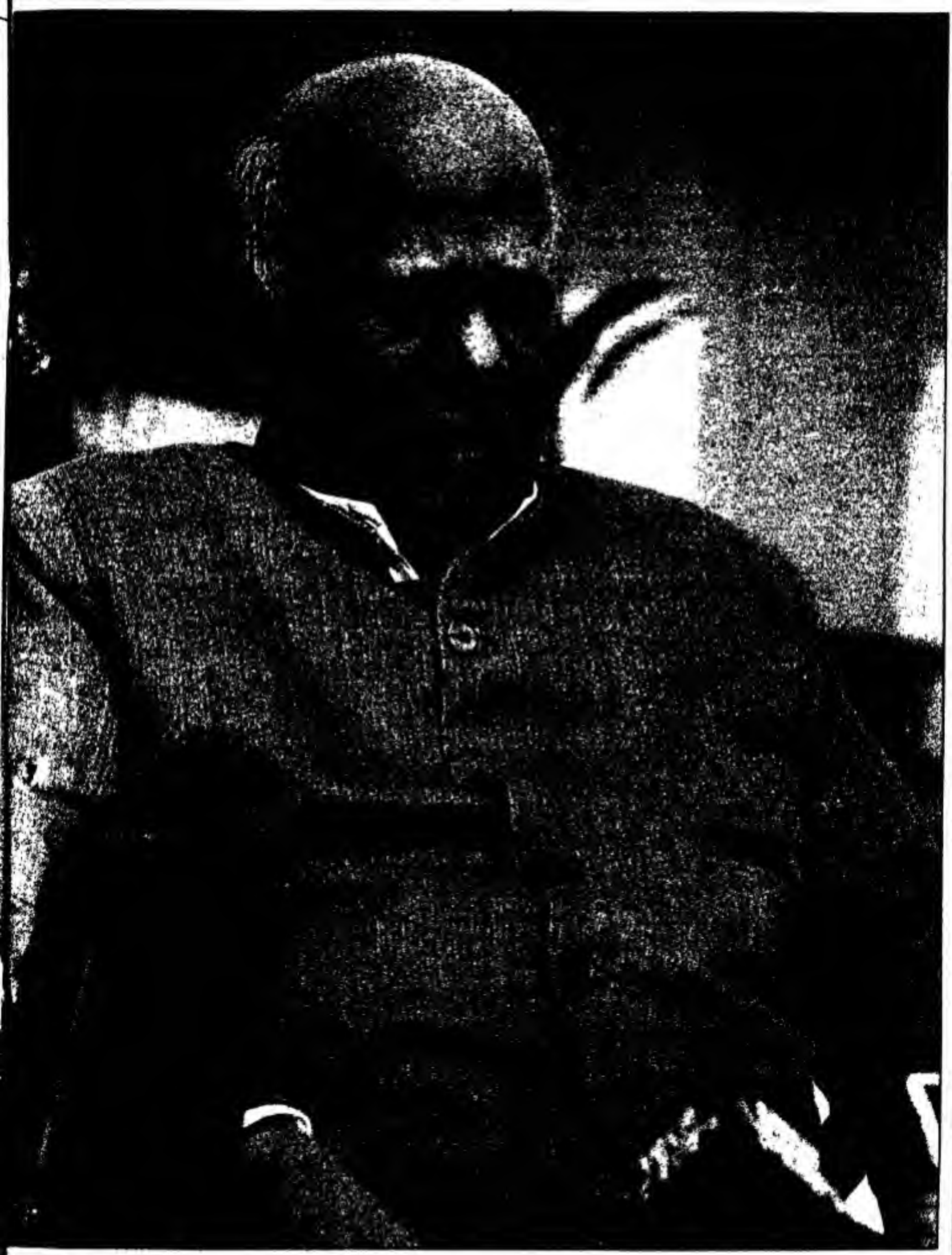
Jalappa doesn't do things by halves. When he talks about the thugs in the Janata Dal, he names them. He says Deve Gowda and his cohorts are thugs.

He's particularly angry with the cohorts, because he considers them promising young men, who don't have to lick anyone's boots just to make a career in politics.

Take P.G.R. Scindia and Siddaramiah. Both were ministers in the J.H. Patel-led, Deve Gowda-backed Karnataka government but were in touch with Jalappa. They let him believe they were backing him.

But suddenly Jalappa found Scindia wasn't taking his calls and Siddaramiah mysteriously left town everytime he tried to call on him. It was clear that they were staying on in the Deve Gowda-controlled Janata Dal instead of following Jalappa.

So Jalappa is now on his own. The Congress isn't a particularly happy place to be. But at least they are opposing the BJP. And there are no thugs here, with names like Deve Gowda. •



REEL JINNAH

The Asia Society, which has done more than the usual bit to take Asia closer to the US, has managed another event in America. 'Jinnah,' the controversial feature film on the founder of Pakistan starring Christopher Lee and our own Shashi

M.A. Jinnah: now on celluloid

Kapoor will be premiered in New York on March 22 courtesy Asia Society — to be watched for the first time by a mixed crowd of Indians and Pakistanis.

But it was not without hitch. The film on Mohammad Ali Jinnah was ready only after a string of setbacks with directors forced to petition the Pakistan PM for withdrawal of a ban on its shooting. *Jinnah* will, hopefully, tell the truth about the vivisection of the subcontinent 50 years ago, *Qadi-e-Azam* himself and the role played in the creation of Pakistan.

Whether Christopher Lee's Jinnah can outdo Ben Kinsley's Gandhi is an intriguing but less vital point of interest.

VOTE FOR PAPA

No, he's not shooting for *Aaj ka MP*, though the canvassing is in earnest. Soon enough, ChandrachurSingh, the *Maachis* man, will be shouting assorted pro-Samajwadi slogans. The dialogue, predictably, will be as filmy, but minus the usual lights-action-camera.

No, this is not out of any special love for Mulayam Singh Yadav. It's all part of filial duty: Chandrachur's father

Chandrachur Singh: new role

CAPTAIN COOK

He's known as the ambassador extraordinaire of Indian taste. Jay Inder Singh Kalra, otherwise Jiggs, led a team of Indian chefs to St. Moritz, Switzerland, to take part in the gourmet festival which began on 29 January.

The team included Raminder Pal Singh Malhotra, who is best known for blending tradition and modernity in Indian cooking.

Jiggs Kalra (second from right): serving India on a platter

Captain Baldev Singh will be fighting the coming Lok Sabha polls from Aligarh, but the sitting MLA from the state is still banking on his son's Bollywood glamour to win him a seat in Parliament. Sitting BJP MP Sheila Gautam, however, is not over-perturbed. Hasn't she won this seat twice?

But the crowds couldn't care less. There isn't much difference between a poll ticket and a cinema ticket; at least that's how they look at it: either way you get nearly the *same* kind of performance.

Mohammed Ilyas, the master currymaker from Lucknow, and Sunil Chauhan, known as the tandoor maestro.

The theme of the St. Moritz Gourmet Festival this year was *Different Cuisines and Their Philosophies*. Kalra spoke on *Impact of Ayurveda on Indian cooking*. He shared the dais with such icons of cuisine as Paul Docuse and Roger Verge.

The St. Moritz festival has attracted some of the best chefs in the world who have showcased their talent to colleagues. Anton Mossiman *Mossiman's*, London); Peter Knipp of *The Raffles* Singapore; Shinji Yamamoto *the Hilton*, Osaka and Mark Baker *Four Seasons* Chicago.

The Indians have now added their name to this list. Cause for a grand feast.

CALLING ALL TRAVELLERS

[redacted] Anu Malhotra is on cloud nine. And rightly so. Produced and directed by her, *Namaste India* has made it again, wininng, for the second time, the National Award for Tourism.

The first travel show of its kind, *Namaste India*was telecast on Zee and is now being re-run on Zee India. Awarded for being the best national film on tourism, it seeks to promote travel within India and is scripted with the Indian viewer in mind

Anu, the vivacious woman behind the show, says AIM television, the house which produces *Namaste India*, is the only one which has two shows running simultaneously: *Indian Holiday* on Sony Entertainment Television and *Namaste*. And if viewer response is anything, there may soon be more.

Anu Malhotra: highway queen

ALL FOR LOVE

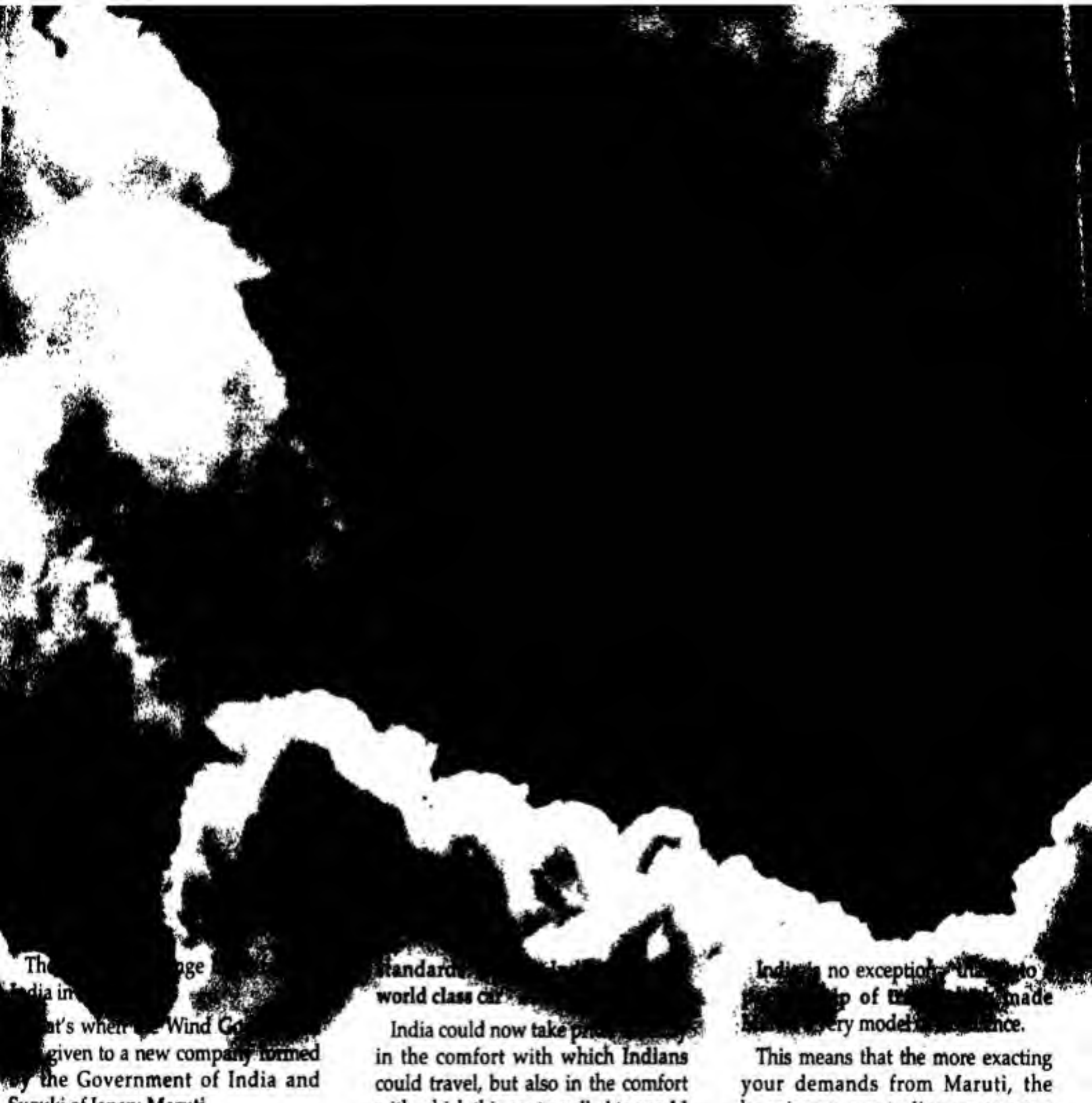
[redacted] Not happy with just music videos starring himself, India's most flamboyant music director Bappi Lahiri is now into movies — directing a film called, somewhat unexcitingly, *Love Story 1998*.

Bappi Lahiri: If music be the food of love...

What is exciting, however, is that the cast is to include Boy George, lead singer of the British band, Culture Club.

George will play a friend of the hero's with Lahiri planning to premiere the film simultaneously in Bombay and London this March.

It's not known if this will be any sort of update on Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *1942 A Love Story*. So *Kuchh na kaho*...just get ready for some far-out caterwauling.



The [illegible]age
India in [illegible]
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[illegible]given to a new company formed
by the Government of India and
Suzuki of Japan: **Maruti**.

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India could now take pr[illegible]
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[redacted]

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"If people see and reject my films, that is a different kind of disappointment but I can still understand it. Bût when they are reluctant to see it and then say they cannot understand it, it is really scary"

The isolation of film-maker Girish Kasaravalli

ACCOLADES *without* APPLAUSE

He has made six highly acclaimed films, won national and international awards and has long been considered a master of his craft. Anybody who's won so many accolades would be more than just the toast of society. But the soft-spoken Girish Kasaravalli is cast in a different mould. He is mild-mannered, almost to the point of being diffident about his successes. Dressed in a striped shirt and formal trousers, he looks more like a bank manager rather than a seminal filmmaker.

But 'making an impression' is the least of Kasaravalli's problems. His wry smile tries but desperately fails to hide his dismay at being isolated in the medium of cinema today. A product of the Seventies' 'New Age' cinema, the 40-something Kasaravalli finds himself ploughing a lonely furrow in a field abandoned by others for either the lucre of [illegible]ular films or the hurrahs of 'middle' [illegible]na.

It is an irony that Kasaravalli's situation mirrors the concerns he has expressed through his famed films: the isolation of an individual from society. In his remarkable debut film *Ghattashraddha*, he told the tale of a young but 'fallen' Brahmin widow's ouster from society when the community performs her final rites. Two decades later, he makes *Kraurya* depicting the cruelty towards an old woman whom society no longer finds useful.

And while the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC)-produced film remains in the cans for lack of concerted efforts to find cinema halls, Kasaravalli puts that shy smile back on his face and completes yet another film about the gradual coming of age of a woman in a north Karnataka village even as her country gains independence and slowly slides into a moribund state.

"A common thread in all my films is this isolation of a person. One of the cruellest things you can do to a person is to make him feel he is not one of you," says Kasaravalli about his films. But he could very well be speaking about himself. He is possibly the only one in a galaxy of directors who is still making films using the still relevant idiom and ideology of 'New Age' cinema to

express concerns of contemporary society.

Making films of a different genre has clearly not been easy. Though his works have been called 'Kafkaesque' and even said to be influenced by Bergman and Truffaut (which he denies, naturally), the only tools he had when he began were a diploma in direction from the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) and anger at the prejudices in an askew society.

Together, they have helped him tell extraordinary tales in remarkably different ways. Be it the story of a Yakshagana artiste who sells his soul for success or the travails of a middle-class couple's (played by Naseeruddin Shah and Deepti Naval) search of a living space in the bilingual *Ghar* (in Hindi)/*Mane* (in Kannada).

Success has come along with difficult breaks. But the choices Kasaravalli has made reflect his attitude to life and cinema. For instance, what he tried to achieve as director of the Adarsha Film Institute in Bangalore during the Eighties. "Had I been an ordinary lecturer," he reflects, "perhaps things would have been different." But he found that directing both films and the institute was not being fair to either and decided to concentrate on the latter. His guesstimated two-year break from directing films to ensure that the institute would get the grant-in-aid it had been promised and give it the direction it badly needed turned out to six long barren years.

A SCENE FROM THAISAHEB

Meantime, he also discovered that his aesthetics of cinema vastly differed from what the institute aimed at. While he thought that the organisation should concentrate on courses in direction so that it would bring a breath of fresh air into the Kannada industry, the institute figured what the industry really needed were good dancers and singers. "Bharat Natyam should not be part of any film course. Besides, as far as I saw, all the students passing out of Adarsha were being used as extras," says Kasaravalli. "And I thoroughly opposed it." His ultimatum to cut down on the lucrative dancing courses and concentrate on the direction programmes saw his exit from the institute.

But then, he had to face another problem: self-confidence. It had been five years since he had directed a film and he was consumed by self-doubt. "I had begun to think perhaps I will not be able to make a film any more," he says of the long lay-off. "I don't know how it happens, but you start questioning your own creative abilities: whether you have lost the touch, whether you can really make another decent film in your life."

Still, he managed to find the inner resources to begin work on his script of *Tabarana Kathe*, based on a short story by well-known Kannada writer Poornachandra Tejaswi. The film, starring Charu Hasan as Tabara, a poor clerk made to run from pillar to post in a newly-independent India for a pension desperately needed to save his wife's life, won Kasaravalli more than his sense of self-worth as a director. The film bagged him both national and state awards.

Despite the accolades, the audiences have consistently cold-shouldered his works. "It may sound cliched," he says in his soft voice, "but to me, cinema is a way of putting across my view of an aspect of contemporary life. Okay, I don't imagine that once I make a film it should run for 50 days, proudly display house-full boards, or any such thing. But I crave a feedback. It has been a discouraging experience that there are not enough number of viewers for my kind of films."

Kasaravalli's problem is that he cannot bring himself to make *masala* fare since he does believe in the commercial cinema's ideological politics of upholding the status quo in Indian society. Since he is more concerned about questioning concepts in middle-class traditional Indian families, how can he switch over to a kind of cinema where the *mangalsutra* or the 'virginal purity' still reign supreme?

Ideological problems extend from the late director Puttanna Kanagal's covert yet hugely successful style of upholding Brahminical values to the panacea offered by the likes of Mani Ratnam in *Roja*. "Mani Ratnam's analysis of burning issues seem straight out of a fairy tale," remarks Kasaravalli. "My problem rests not with his idioms but with his analysis. Though, as a film it thrills me to see how he uses the medium, somewhere I feel what he is saying is not right."

Kasaravalli feels one of the problems ailing New Age cinema and the reason why its former proponents have since fled is the label that such films are 'boring'. "This image has been mythified so much that a majority of people don't even bother to find out whether it is true or not," he points out. "If people see and reject my films, that is a different kind of disappointment but I can still understand it. Just the way I would if they say they do not agree with my point of view. But when they are reluctant to see it and then say they cannot understand it, it is really scary."

Yet, as his latest *Thaisaheb* prepares to be released, Kasaravalli shows no signs of compromising on his aesthetics of cinema. In the meantime, he does not crave for awards, yet he gets them. He craves for audiences, and they fail him repeatedly.

And the isolation of Kasaravalli continues. •

Gauri Lankesh/Bangalore

INDER MALHOTRA

West meets East

The US is keen to befriend China

The visit to China by the United States' defence secretary, William Cohen, is an event of major significance which should not be allowed to be obscured because of our preoccupation with a fractious general election. The point to note is that the Cohen mission to Beijing has turned out to be a continuation of the Clinton policy of conceding to China whatever it wants largely on its own terms.

This policy was first brought out in bold relief during the landmark sojourn in America in October last, of the Chinese President, Jiang Zemin. The US agreed to lift the long-enforced ban on the export of American civilian nuclear technology to China, in return for the latter's "promise" to have no further cooperation with Iran in nuclear and missile fields. As a distinguished commentator in *The New York Times* pointed out, all that the Chinese had promised was not to "repeat what they say they have never done in the past". No matter. The world's sole surviving superpower is keen to befriend the fast-emerging power of Asia, even while making token gestures to vocal groups of Americans who are critical of China's record in relation to human rights, non-proliferation and free trade and are suspicious of its great and growing might.

US defence secretary William Cohen's mission to Beijing has turned out to be a continuation of Bill Clinton's (above) policy of conceding to China whatever it wants largely on its own terms

Some days ago, Bill Clinton lifted the embargo on the supply of the civilian nuclear technology to China. American Congress has 30 working days (up to the middle of March) to obstruct or object to the presidential notification, failing which it will automatically go into force. The US Congress has more critics of China than there are in the Clinton administration. Cohen's purpose in flying to the Chinese capital was to see to it that nothing goes wrong with the implementation of the nuclear deal entered into by Clinton and Jiang.

To assuage Congressional fears about China's violations of non-proliferation treaties and commitments, Cohen cleverly concentrated only on Iran and, according to his own statement, secured from Jiang and the Chinese defence minister, Chi Haotian, pledges not to sell Iran any more cruise missiles or nuclear technology which "went beyond" similar assurances given to Clinton by the Chinese President in October. Evidently, in the administration's estimate such a declaration would suffice to persuade the Congress to go along with Clinton.

However, we in this country, must ask why is it that on the subject of Chinese exports of missiles and nuclear equipment and technology the Americans only talk of Iran and never of Pakistan. Moreover, this happens in spite of reports from American sources themselves that the China-Pakistan nuclear and missile cooperation continues. Is it because the US does not bother about this cosy togetherness?

Both Cohen and his Chinese hosts have said nothing publicly about some sensitive matters. But there is little doubt that China has expressed strong criticism of America's multilateral military alliances with Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea and, above all, Japan. China's decision to start talks with Taiwan for reunification is also aimed at averting any American or Japanese attempt to interfere with the equation between the two entities across the Taiwan Straits.

Much has been made by the American media of the military maritime safety agreement signed during Cohen's stay in Beijing. The need for this agreement arose because of an incident two years ago when the US aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk* was followed by a Chinese submarine too close for comfort. It should not be overlooked, however, that the flip side of the same treaty is that no American submarine can follow Chinese warships either.

From time to time, the US threatens China with sanctions. But such threats are like, to use a Chinese expression, firing "empty cannons". China's economic clout *vis-a-vis* the US is formidable. •

"We have to save Bihar from Laloo Yadav"

Raghunath Jha blasts his former chief and outlines his own mission

There is trouble in Lalooland. Ever since he returned to active politics after being granted bail in connection with the fodder-scam case, Laloo Prasad Yadav has had his eyes set on a greater 'national role'. But in his bid to play to wider galleries, he's been guilty of neglecting his bastion: Bihar. It's on homeground that Laloo is under siege from the Samata-BJP combine and is making more enemies than friends.

The latest in the line of Laloo's friend-turned-foes is the no. 2 man in his Cabinet, parliamentary affairs minister Raghunath Jha. The veteran legislator has been one of the closest confidants of the former Bihar CM and played political tutor to CM Rabri Devi in her husband's absence.

But there has always been an undercurrent of the Yadav-Jha rivalry between the two. And now, it's exploded with Raghunath Jha deciding to ditch "traitor" Laloo and cross over to the Samata camp.

Minutes after tendering his resignation, Raghunath Jha spoke to SUNDAY. Excerpts.

A.V. KISHAN

"Laloo would never have humiliated me like this if I was a Yadav," says Raghunath Jha (left)

SUNDAY: What has prompted this sudden move?
Raghunath Jha: I have had enough of Laloo Yadav's devious ways. It was he who had made a public announcement earlier that I would be contesting the Sheohar parliamentary seat. When he was in jail he called me and repeated his promise. So, I had begun spending a lot of time touring the villages. The people there have known me for years, and trust me. But then, suddenly, for purely selfish gains, Laloo Prasad has decided to give the ticket to that murderer Anand Mohan, the greatest enemy of social justice.

How can I tolerate this insult? I have been betrayed and humiliated by Laloo Yadav.

Q: But why did Laloo give the ticket to Anand Mohan knowing that it would upset you?
A: Out of insecurity and selfish desire. Laloo Prasad fears that he could lose from Madhepura this time and is banking on Anand Mohan to get him the Rajput votes. The Sheohar ticket was part of the deal...but I know that Laloo would never have done this to me if I was a Yadav.

Q: Did Laloo discuss the move with you?
A: No, not once. Whenever I would ask him, he would assure me that there was nothing wrong. But now I realise that is the duplicity of the man. That is how he operates. I have been by his side for so many years, through thick and thin, good and evil, and this is how he betrays me...I'm in politics to do some work and earn respect. It is beneath my dignity to be associated with Laloo Yadav anymore.

Q: Has Laloo changed over the years?
A: The change in him has set in during his second term as chief minister. I had hoped that the jail term would teach him a lesson, and enable him to rectify his faults. But after coming out of jail, he's become far worse.

Q: What are you planning to do to stop him?
A: I'll be joining the Samata Party this evening. I won't contest the Sheohar seat, but I'll do all that I can to help defeat Anand Mohan. I will sincerely work for the success of the Samata-BJP combine in Bihar.

Q: Till yesterday, you were full of praise for Laloo and lost no opportunity to blast the BJP...
A: I have realised what this man really is like. Through the years, he has either sidelined or humiliated his colleagues and forced them to leave. So, none of his old comrades, like Nitish, Sharad, or Ram Vilas, is with him anymore. *Laloo Yadav ko sirf chatukaar chahiye* (Laloo Yadav just needs sycophants).

The need of the hour is to save Bihar from Laloo Yadav. If we do not tell the people the truth, Laloo and Co. will destroy Bihar.

Q: Is this the beginning of the end for Laloo?
A: Yes. The Samata-BJP combine will sweep the Lok Sabha polls. Even he knows that his time is up, so he's a desperate man...*Vinaash kale vipreet buddhi!* •

Sumit Das Gupta/Calcutta

The Search *for a* Prime Minister

If not Atal Behari Vajpayee, then who? Understanding the candidates and the combinations

There was a time when the Congress was the first to plaster posters with mugshots 'We have a Prime Minister,' party workers would say smugly Then with a smirk, referring to the Opposition "They? There there are so many people who want to become Prime Minister that it's hard to keep count

The person, the prime ministerial candidate, was the Congress

But today, Congressmen sing a different tune

"It isn't even *healthy*," they say It is a sign of *inner-party democracy*," they explain, when they're asked who their Prime Minister will be Tackling the question at press conferences, they intone self-righteously "In a democratic set up, elected members decide who the next PM should be"

"Of course, it would be different if Soniaji was interested ,' they add, oblivious to irony It is taken for granted that members will not dare to oppose Sonia Gandhi's coronation as the party's prime ministerial candidate, if she so desires

It is simply a reflection of the Congress' dynastic legacy of the past An insecurity so deeply embedded in the psyche of an average Congressman that it now seems only natural for them to wait for a member of the Gandhi family to grow up and reclaim the party and, consequently, the country

Likely CONGRESS *Candidates*

SITARAM KESRI

■ The Congress party president has only one unrealised ambition — to unfurl the Indian flag from Red Fort on 15 August

FOR

As party chief he could manufacture a consensus around his name, just the way he did during the party's organisational elections

AGAINST

With Sonia playing an active role in the party's affairs, the 10 Janpath brigade is baying for his blood. Also, if the UF supports a Congress government they would never compromise on Kesri as PM

Voters at a polling booth: what will be the people's verdict?

MANMOHAN SINGH

■ Bureaucrat-turned-finance minister-turned-politician, Manmohan Singh is one of the most serious contenders for the top job

FOR

Least controversial and non-threatening to the party's top-rung leadership. He has also emerged as 10 Janpath's candidate for the job.

AGAINST

It's still a mystery as to how that rumour started— Sonia is still to come out openly in his favour. Besides, Singh has Gujral's problem: nice and accommodative but without a

Sitaram Kesri

P.A. SANGMA

■ This is not the first time the Lok Sabha Speaker's name is doing the rounds: first-time MPs suggested his name in a bid to avoid mid-term polls

FOR

He is the Congress party's politically-correct candidate: being a Christian and a tribal, Sangma represents the minorities

AGAINST

While Sangma is everybody's candidate, he still remains nobody's candidate. He has no backers who would lobby for him.

While the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is only too happy to play up the 'able leadership' card, it is the Congress and the United Front that squirm each time the issue of a Prime Minister comes up.

The United Front with two former PMs, who were Prime Ministers in the fairly recent past, is still not talking about the future PM. And the Congress which has a former PM, P.V. Narasimha Rao, didn't even grant him a ticket, leave alone making use of him for campaigning or projecting him as a second-term PM.

Among all the parties there seems to be just one man ready for the job: Atal Behari Vajpayee. Will this make a difference to the election prospects of parties? Will other parties decide on a candidate to counter the BJP's able leadership plank? Why the delay and the dilemma?

Are we heading towards an Atal Behari Vajpayee versus nobody election?

THE CONGRESS(I)

Never before in history has the Congress gone for polls without a prime ministerial candidate. Or, rather, without a charismatic personality who wasn't seen as a logical answer to the PM's post.

But there has been an exception to this rule. The trend has reversed only and only when a Nehru-Gandhi descendent has not been around.

Congress history has time and again proved and reaffirmed this.

Right after Jawaharlal Nehru's death, Lal Bahadur Shastri took over. Meanwhile, Indira Gandhi was waiting in the wings to take charge. Shastri was perceived as a 'soft' Prime Minister and right after his death, in 1966, Indira took over.

The fact that the Congress party was to be led only by a Gandhi family descendent was proved yet again by the unquestioning acceptance of Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984.

While Sanjay Gandhi had been actively involved in politics, Rajiv had never showed much interest in his mother's preoccupations. If he had distinctive leadership qualities, they took a long time to surface. That the Congress(I) decided to crown him king despite the absence of any track record of leadership just showed the peculiar way in which the Congress mind worked. And till today, the Congress party leadership is premised on one factor.

"For prime ministership, the main criterion is acceptability," says party spokesperson V.N. Gadgil. However, the bottomline remains that acceptability in the Congress comes with the 'born in Gandhi family' tag.

Sitaram Kesri could be the party president but his presence and importance within the party diminished the day

Likely UNITED FRONT *Candidates*

Mulayam Singh

Jyoti Basu

I.K. Gujral

MULAYAM SINGH YADAV

■ His name has suddenly come up as the UF's candidate. But this would depend on whether he gets the right numbers from his home state. Whether he stays with the Front or not is also questionable

FOR

Has a lot of clout and is also the darling of the CPI(M) (read Harkishen Singh Surjeet)

AGAINST

Does not have a national presence. Even as defence minister, Yadav had a tough time staying away from Lucknow

JYOTI BASU

■ Last time, the chief minister of West Bengal had refused to accept the offer. However, he seems to have changed his mind since, and is more open to the idea now

FOR

Clean record, seasoned politician and this time he's ready for a stint at the Centre

AGAINST

To accommodate those who don't get with the Left ideology would be the most ticklish problem

I.K. GUJRAL

■ The former PM had lasted only six months. Though the UF constituents do not see another term for him, Gujral is confident he is still in the race

FOR

[illegible]

AGAINST

[illegible]

Sonia Gandhi decided to join the campaign.

And now, all roads lead to 10 Janpath.

It has indeed made a big difference to the party. While Congressmen were deserting the party in batches it was only after *Madam's* entry that the exodus stopped. "Sonia's presence has helped the Congress party because it has galvanised the workers and stopped the outflow of Congressmen," says Gadgil.

What is intriguing is why, despite her entry, members of the party are still brushing the issue of prime ministership under the carpet. Is the Congress uncomfortable with her Italian connection? Why is she not being bulldozed into taking over the party completely?

What is intriguing is why, despite Sonia's entry, members of the party are still brushing the issue of prime ministership under the carpet. Is the Congress uncomfortable with her Italian connection? Why is she not being bulldozed into taking over the party completely?

Congressmen are uncomfortable with that question. "Sonia has made a remarkable difference to the party. We will go by her advice," says senior Congress leader Pranab Mukherjee. "What role she wants to play is for her to decide," he adds.

The fact remains that despite the inherent sycophantic Congress culture, even senior leaders within the party are not sure whether a foreign-born '*bahu*' — despite her claims that she is more Indian than many Indians — would be acceptable to the country as its PM.

And other political parties are quick to react.

Political adversaries have already started making the right noises. And Sonia is smart enough to understand that this would only lead to the demystification of Sonia Gandhi. "A person who from the time of her marriage in 1968 till the time her husband became Prime Minister chose to reject Indian citizenship, to my mind such a person's patriotism is definitely in doubt," says George Fernandes of the Samata Party. Even the electorate might not be too kind to a foreigner. The slot that she falls into would be that of V.P. Singh's in the last United Front government.

To cover their flanks, Congressmen say it is "too early" to talk about the likely Prime Minister. 'Madam' has not decided yet. While there is talk of Dr Manmohan Singh as

How Parties Fared When They Had A PM Candidate

The 1971 elections

Indira Gandhi went to the polls on the strength of the Indo-Pak war. She happily agreed that she was the only 'man' in her Cabinet and, therefore, the only claimant for the PM's slot. The Congress got 66 per cent of the total Lok Sabha seats

The 1984 elections

Indira Gandhi was assassinated and her mantle came to Rajiv Gandhi. Of course the Congress won a brute majority — 80 per cent of the seats — but Rajiv Gandhi was projected as the heir to the prime ministerial throne just before the elections

The 1989 elections

From the days of Jan Morcha to the days of Janata Dal, V.P. Singh emerged as the Janata Dal's prime ministerial candidate. Reeling under Bofors and other corruption charges, the Congress could manage just 37.5 per cent of the seats. V.P. Singh, as the leader of the diverse Janata Dal coalition, formed the government

10 Janpath's candidate for the Prime Minister's slot, Congress leaders will wait for the official nod.

So ostensibly, while others take charge, 10 Janpath controls what is to be said or done. And the timing could not have been better for Sonia's intervention. The strategy also seems to be well-worked-out.

If the Congress suffers losses, it was because Sonia stayed away from contesting. And if the Congress does well it will be because of her active campaigning. The enigma is intact — she was not part of the power-hungry, mucky Indian politics. And whatever seats the party picks up was because she belonged to a family that sacrificed two members for the country.

"Dynasty does not mean that something belongs to the family," argues Arjun Singh. "In this case members of this family have made supreme sacrifices and made their place in the political set-up after passing the democratic test. They have acquired a particular position," he adds.

But Opposition is quick to react. Does that mean that just about anybody from the Gandhi family has a right to rule?

For every time in the past when there has been a power struggle it has been during the time of a non-Gandhi leader of the Congress. Rajiv Gandhi, when he took over from his mother, began his tenure with a resolve to democratise the Congress. He announced the holding of organisational elections in 1986. However, with a rapid decline in popularity he backtracked and remained party president for as long as he was alive.

While pointing out the ills of Narasimha Rao's rule, most Congressmen forget that Rao was the first elected president of the party in 20 years.

With the tussle between making the party more democratic and reinforcing the regency, the Congress has little time to think about the prime ministership. And 10 Janpath's complacency stems from the fact that for a faction-ridden Congress party, the only unifying factor till the near future seems to be the Gandhi name.

THE UNITED FRONT

Strangely enough the United Front faces a dilemma similar to the Congress party's. The leadership crisis emerges out of another crisis — the politics of groups and the indecision over the group to identify with.

Though Sonia Gandhi's decision to campaign has given most Congressmen a direction to move in, the problem in the United Front is that there are too many voices.

But the Front seems unfazed.

"The United Front is one outfit where lust for chair is not there *(sic)*," says Amar Singh, Samajwadi Party general secretary with a straight face. "We will decide when the

Atal Behari Vajpayee with L.K. Advani: are we heading towards a Vajpayee versus nobody election?

time comes," he adds.

However, the United Front's complacency has other reasons. The Front has survived the difficult tightrope walking before H.D. Deve Gowda's elevation as PM; and, yet again, during the selection of Inder Kumar Gujral after the Congress pulled out support from the Gowda-led UF government.

You could say that in a sense, the United Front has survived leadership crises. The Front seems to be comfortable with round after round of painfully-protracted talks to decide on the choice of Prime Minister.

The irony is that this is a Front which had two Prime Ministers and yet both have been dumped for the present elections. United Front believes in short-term planning and as far as the Front is concerned, both Gowda and Gujral appear to be spent forces.

And How They Fared When They Didn't

The 1967 elections

Indira Gandhi emerged out of her father's shadows and only just managed to break the syndicate. She did assume the PM's mantle, but had to contend with many problems — including the fact that most governments in crucial states were anti-Congress. The Congress got 54 per cent of the seats, but had to face a highly vocal Opposition in Parliament

The 1977 elections

The Janata Party won a huge majority, mainly because of the anti-Emergency vote. However, there was so much bickering over Morarji Desai's prime ministership that, in public mind, the Janata Party — and later the Janata Dal — became synonymous with wrangling over leadership

The 1991 elections

Rajiv Gandhi's assassination led to the formation of a Congress government by default. It is hard to say what might have happened in this election had the Congress leader lived. At one stage it looked as if the BJP — with Advani as PM — would win the day

V.N. Gadgil: "For prime ministership, the main criterion is acceptability"

THE SLOGANS PMS WENT TO THE PEOPLE WITH

INDIRA GANDHI

She relied mostly on the *garibi hatao* variety of slogans, with some variations along the way — *Roti, Kupda aur Makan*, instability and its effect on prices, etc

V.P. SINGH

Singh could have made The Dynasty the issue. Instead, he focused on the systematic robbery of the state, illustrated by the Bofors scam

RAJIV GANDHI

Made his debut in politics with 'how so many generations of Nehrus and Gandhis had served India'; continued with 'how only the Congress could save India from instability and chaos'

CHANDRA SHEKHAR

Although he was in power for just four months, he turned this to his advantage. His slogan was that he did more in four months than the Congress and the Janata Dal did when they got four years

NARASIMHA RAO

Was generous. He gave the credit for his success to his finance minister, Manmohan Singh. Sold 'liberalisation' as his slogan. The people of India saw through the other theme he tried to project—corruption —by the Havala charge-sheets

Or so some in the Front would like to believe.

A patchwork of various parties, each constituent has its own agenda. And with varied interests within the Front, the dynamics of ever-changing equations has to be kept in mind.

"Last time the criterion was the least controversial candidate but this time there are various other things to be taken into account," says Amar Singh. What Singh leaves unsaid is that, this time round, the candidates for prime ministership and their backers have changed.

The lowest common multiple for a UF Prime Minister has been the candidate who is least controversial. With Gujral annoying Mulayam Singh Yadav on his acceptance of the Akali offer of a safe seat from Jallandhar, there is no way the Front will project him as their prime ministerial candidate this time.

Mulayam Singh Yadav and Jyoti Basu both seem to be emerging as serious contenders. But there is a catch. While Yadav seems to have the right combination of cunning and clout, it will mainly depend on the number of seats he gets from Uttar Pradesh. "If he does well in UP, there is no stopping him. He will emerge as the prime ministerial candidate," says a Janata Dal leader.

Whereas despite the fact that Jyoti Basu's name is also doing the rounds, the gound reality is very different. Basu's candidature will pose a serious problem for constituents such as the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). To reach a common understanding of economic policies would be next to impossible.

"Right now who the next PM will be is not really relevant," says Sitaram Yechury, CPI(M) politburo member. "It will all depend on the inner-party dynamics," he adds. For the UF to then have a definitive answer on who their next PM will be, is premature.

Besides, for the Janata Dal and other constituents who belong to the socialist tradition, a leadership crisis is something they have grown with. Indeed, they don't see this as a crisis at all. There have been many *equal* leaders. And projection of any one leader is always a problem.

It happened in 1977 with Morarji Desai, Charan Singh and Jagjivan Ram. The same scene was repeated in 1989 with V.P. Singh, Chandra Shekhar and Devi Lal. The socialist tradition has been to choose the first among equals and what is happening now could well be a legacy from the past.

THE BJP

If there is one thing the BJP is comfortable about it is it's prime ministerial can-

Amar Singh: "The UF is one outfit where lust for chair is not there. We will decide when the time comes"

didate. While the Congress and the United Front fumble and flounder at who their candidate is, the BJP announces placidly: "Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee is not merely the party's choice but the nation's natural choice." (Party spokesperson Sushma Swaraj.)

However, whether the 'able leadership' plank will translate into votes remains to be seen.

The BJP has never been stuck on this issue. They have been consistent with their choice of the prime ministerial candidate. Despite that in the last elections where major political parties were unable to project a prime ministerial candidate (though Narasimha Rao was around, it was more than evident that he was the reluctant choice of the Congress), the BJP slogan was still '*Sabko dekha bari bari, abki bari Atal Behari*' (Everybody has been tried time and again, now it is Atal Behari's turn).

Today, the slogan is the same.

It did not work the last time. The fact remains that the BJP was short of majority. "As far as I remember, for the last 20-odd years the BJP slogan has been '*Agli bari Atal Behari*'," laughs Sitaram Yechury.

No matter what the BJP says about him being it's unique selling point, Vajpayee could neither help them garner a majority nor influence other leaders to support them at the time of proving majority on the floor of the House. And this is after polling the highest as the ideal Prime Minister in every opinion poll during the last two elections.

Narasimha Rao: the Congress didn't even grant him a ticket, leave alone making use of him for campaigning or projecting him as a second-term PM

Besides, Vajpayee's candidature has not come without its set of problems. The BJP is strongly divided between the Advani and Vajpayee camps. The party's sentiment is largely with its president. "Had the Havala incident not happened, our choice would have been Advani," says a senior leader.

But the BJP is a party that believes in playing by the rules. They will make you believe that to squabble for power is too low for them. And when there is a leadership crisis, in a post-Gujarat era, the party understands that mere counselling does not help.

When Madan Lal Khurana and Sahib Singh Verma locked horns over the chief ministership of Delhi, Khurana was silently co-opted in national politics and given a ticket from Sadar.

This is not just a stray incident. It highlights the working style of the party. For a party so strictly controlled by cadres and inner-party code of discipline, consensus on the future PM is the least of their worries.

What is important, however, is how their 'able leader' will talk against corruption after an alliance with Jayalalitha. And explain criminalisation in politics after giving a ticket to Sanjay Singh from Amethi.

And, above all, after so many years of trashing the Congress' politics of charisma, explain using their own leader for the same purpose.

The outcome of this election is going to be interesting for an obvious reason: the country is waiting to see who the Prime Minister will be.

The country and all political parties except the BJP. •

Anuja Pande/New Delhi

THE FRONT WITH A FACE

The first-time MPs at least had a consensus candidate

They were young MPs in a hurry — in a hurry to avoid mid-term polls. So, they all got together, cutting across parties, in a desperate bid to avoid elections.

The strength of first-term MPs went up to 285 after the Lok Sabha was dissolved by the Speaker two months ago. It was a force that fizzled out in the end. For several reasons:

- **These MPs had no clear agenda.**
- **Most of them were clueless on how they could avert elections when the Congress had already withdrawn support.**

The Congress did not attempt to prove majority on the floor of the House, knowing fully well that they would fail.

However, the only reason why this front was being given front-page write-ups was because they had a prime ministerial candidate.

This was the only front with a face.

It was not important that P.A. Sangma, the Lok Sabha Speaker, was their choice. What was important was that they had an alternative.

Memories of the chaos and confusion over choosing Prime Ministers were too fresh in everybody's minds. The United Front had been painfully slow at choosing its PM. It finally settled on H.D. Deve Gowda. The drama repeated itself, virtually scene for scene, when I.K. Gujral became PM.

A ready prime ministerial candidate was the only reason why the group survived for the time it did.

SOLUTIO

The Pentagon is worrying again. And it is not because of an alien attack or Saddam Hussein's latest move. Bill Gates, owner of Microsoft, world's largest software company and richest man on earth, is also a worried man.

At the root of their worries is the Y2K problem. At the turn of the millennium, when 31 December, 1999 changes to 1 January, 2000, computers that only use the last two digits of a year will read the date as 1900. Which will result in a collapse of computer systems all over the globe, upsetting databases. Not a very pleasing thought when our dependence on computers is increasing by the day.

Computer programmes now generally indicate the last two digits of any year and interpret them to refer to a year in the 1900s, so that '00' is read as 1900 rather than 2000. Unless that is changed, computer records in all sections of the government and economy could go haywire on 1 January, 2000. So the turn of the millennium may turn out to be something like a doomsday — ushering in the biggest computer disaster ever. It might mean the destruction of the financial system. And that just because till now most computers have represented the date year in two digits rather than four.

If the problem is left unresolved, computers asked to calculate the period between 1995 and 2000 would then come up with the ridiculous answer 'minus 95 years' In fact, the practical problems have already begun. Computerised shops in the US and Europe are refusing to recognise credit cards with an expiry date after the end of 1999. KLM has already announced no flights on 1 and 2 January 2000 and British Airways is also likely to announce it shortly. The problem will seem even more irremediable as the year 2000 knocks on the doors of the Indian industry. Every Y2K specialist produced in India will be hooked by the dollar-paying MNCs by then.

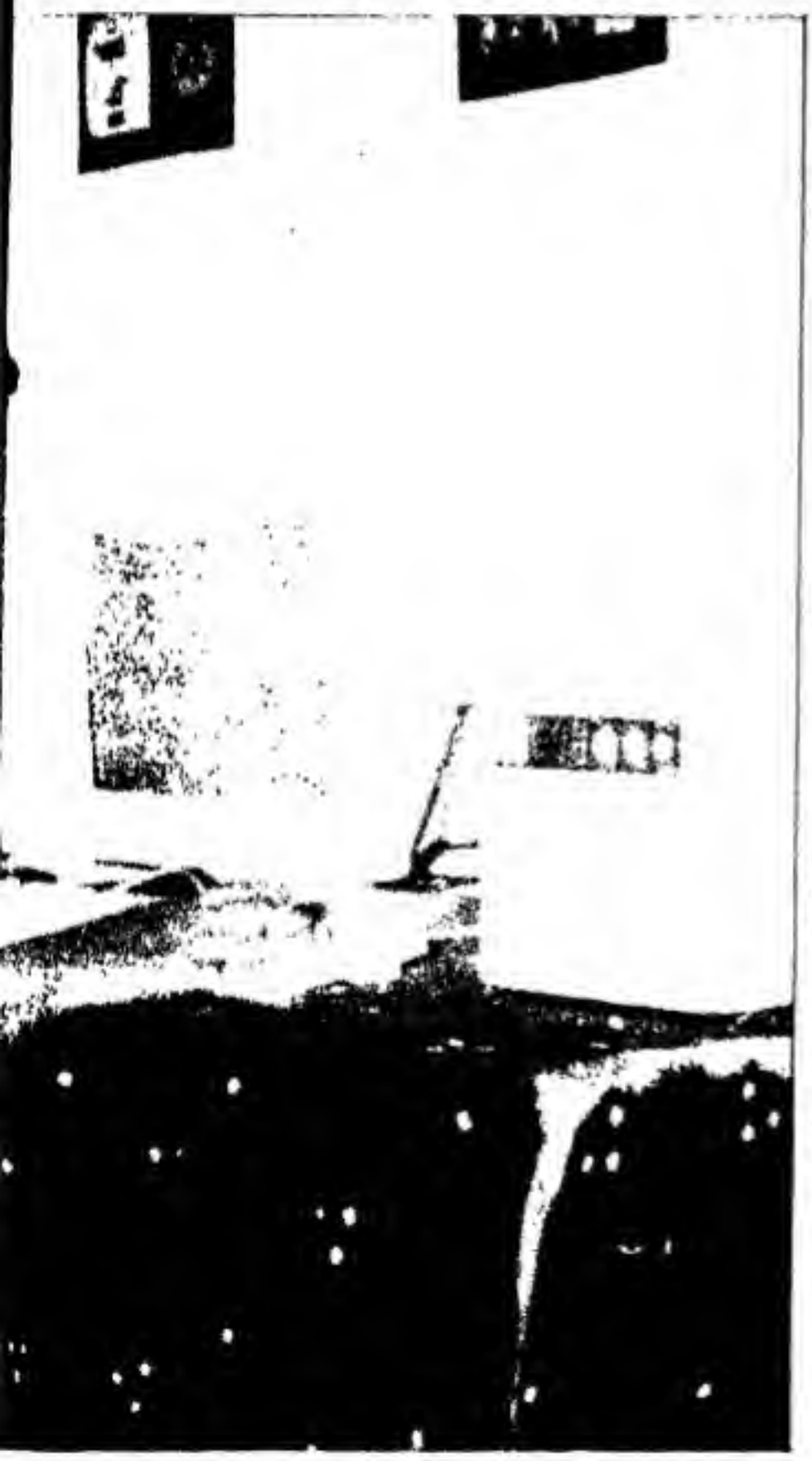
Peter de Jager, the internationally renowned Y2K guru, who was in Bangalore last month, felt the onus lay on Bill Gates. Gates, he said, with his "stature, talents, resources and credibility must solve this Y2K problem in time". But a Madras-based Indian entrepreneur, S. Jayaraj, seems to have beaten Gates to it. Or so he claims. Jayaraj believes he can bring down the conversion time by 40 to 50 per cent. His "alternate method", says this chartered accountant-turned-bug fixer, does not involve any physical or logical expansion of the two-digit date fields.

"Computers don't accept anything illogical," Jayaraj told SUNDAY. "My methodology is looking at the whole problem with a new perception." The focus is on the compiler rather than the database or the programmes. Presently, database or programme-level corrections require six to seven lines of code on an average. Jayaraj's method has to do with two to three lines of code — a generic statement and a neutralising statement, as he puts it. Added to that the correction is done at the compiler level which automates the repeated testing process involved in the other methods.

Said Jayaraj, "The entire problem can be divided into hardware-related and software-related issues. Basically we're trying to address the problems emerging out of software-related errors." Jayaraj

N X

Computer databases may collapse in the year 2000. An Indian computer buff claims to have found a way out



S. JAYARAJ

"I want to protect my solution because the capability to improvise and percolate to the computer market at a much faster speed cannot be ignored"

has discovered that software nucleus as a solution to an existing problem, is more a paradigm shift. But he refuses to spell out the solution to the West.

His proposed meeting with Peter de Jager was a disaster. De Jager declined to certify the radically 'alternative' Y2K methodology proposed by Jayaraj.

Which is no surprise. Considering Jayaraj's proposed method is totally different from those that have been advocated by de Jager for years. While de Jager claims that there is no 'silver bullet' (one single master solution) to the Y2K problem, Jayaraj claims that his solution is very close to one. Said a peeved Jayaraj: "Either he could have offered to react later or could have killed the claim. But he did not do either and my repeated attempts at contacting him over e-mail have been met with silence."

Meanwhile, de Jager told other computer enthusiasts that he wouldn't want to comment on Jayaraj's 'solution' for lack of details. He added that he does not comment on 'vendor products' as his focus was to create an awareness on the issue. Computer industry people in India believe that de Jager will not accept any "half-baked solution" from some Indian nobody knows. In fact, recently, de Jager wrote an open latter to Bill Gates, the Microsoft supremo, insisting that he should assume the role of a leader and come out with a global pronouncement on the issue.

Jayaraj is now in a catch-22 situation. He cannot reveal the solution to the Y2K problem. But Peter de Jager and others may make him out to be another Ramar Pillai and dismiss his solution as a hoax, if he does not.

"I want to protect my solution because the capability to improvise and percolate to the computer market at a much faster speed cannot be ignored," said Jayaraj. He feels time is short and the market is very well-defined and understood. It would make better sense to reach out to the world through western computer giants like IBM or Microfocus who have established their credibility and carved out a marketshare for themselves. Since the new solution is compiler-based, he believes tie-ups with compiler giants would help. The cost of correction, according to Jayaraj, may be around US $ 600 billion, and he does not want to miss out on any percentage of that.

Even if his negotiations with the computer giants fall through, Jayaraj will still have something to fall back on. "The indirect benefits will help me to produce product ranges unconnected with the efforts so far put in," he says.

He has also written to the Government of India, department of electronics to support his cause. But the big question is, as the year 2000 is less than 700 days away, will Peter de Jager come round and respond to Jayaraj's overtures? •

Sreedhar Pillai/Madras

V. GANGADHAR

The Day O

The Great Escape and how the Indian media lapped it up

How lucky are the American and British newspaper readers! The American media went to town on the chances of the President bedding down Gennifer Flowers, Monica Lewinsky and demanding oral sex from Paula Jones. The British media covered in detail the heroic escape of the two ginger-haired Tamworth pigs aptly nicknamed 'Butch Cassidy' and 'Sundance Pig' from an abattoir. *The Daily Mail* carried a banner headline, 'World Oinks-clusive: How The *Mail* Saved The Bacon Of The Tamworth Two'. Its reporter Paul Harris claimed he was 'grunted' an exclusive interview by the pigs. British newspapers and TV channels sent their reporters and photographers pig-chasing.

What do we have on the media front? Poll prospects, defections, Sonia Gandhi, Bofors and the 'stability' of the BJP. I am sick and tired of the crowd, which till yesterday claimed to be 'secular', discovering hidden qualities in the BJP and joining in hordes. Why should Vinod Khanna be worried about our 'stability'? Whichever political party comes to power, he can go ahead making flop films. And imagine a 'secular' Prime Minister stooping to the level of begging for Akali support for the Jalandhar Lok Sabha seat. Will he campaign from inside the Golden Temple with a portrait of Bhindranwale beside him?

It is all so depressing. To take our minds off these, let us imagine how our media would have reacted to the pig escapade.

(*Editorial section of* The Times of India)

Chief reporter: Our corporation reporter had this story: two pigs, on their way to the abattoir, managed to escape.

Editorial adviser: So?

Senior editor: There is a human interest story here. You know how the British press handled a similar story. We followed their example while covering the Imran Khan wedding and the happenings in the British royal family. The vice-chairman, I am sure, will be keen to have the 'pig angle' covered. I think we should talk to him.

(After sometime)

Senior editor: Okay, the green signal has come from the vice-chairman's office. We go all the way with the pig covering. Put four reporters on the beat and spare a couple of photographers.

Editorial adviser: How can we identify the pigs? None of us knows anything about pigs.

Chief reporter: We can take the help of Maneka Gandhi. The vice-chairman is keen that we capture the pigs and take the credit for it. After all, we are the 'leaders' in this business. The budget is unlimited. And it should be done before the finals of the *Femina* fashion show. The pigs will be exhibited at the show.

(Indian Express' *editorial office)*

Editor: Send a fax to Chitra Subramaniam in Geneva. I suspect a link between Bofors and the escaped pigs. She should

f The Pigs

be able to ferret out the truth.

Senior editor: That is unbelievable!

Editor: But Chitra would make you believe. And she will find a link between Bofors, pigs and Sonia Gandhi.

Chief reporter: What happens to the escaped pigs? Do we cover this case?

Editor: Vajpayee phoned me to say that his men are making all efforts to capture the pigs and send them to the zoo. The entire affair is being handled by Pramod Mahajan. I am sure that the BJP, which is certain to come to power, will be successful in this attempt. Keep some space on page one for photographs of Vajpayee with the captured pigs. The BJP wants to show it is a party 'with a heart'. Even for pigs.

(*Editorial office of* The Telegraph)

Editor: Do you think these pigs will make a big story?

Edit-page editor: I should think so. But we shall approach the story from a Marxist and intellectual angle. Dr Ashok Mitra phoned to say he is sending a special story. According to him, these pigs are definitely Marxist pigs running away from a cruel, heartless capitalist system. He even suggested names for the pigs, Stalin and Mao.

(*Editorial office of* Outlook)

Editor: We have to change the cover, I guess. What about Sitaram Kesri with the face of a pig? A bit of symbolism there. Congress running away from the electoral battle, just like those two pigs.

Assistant editor: Great idea. Many of our staff members want to be out looking for the pigs.

Editor: That is good. We shall announce an award, a Tata Sierra for the person who captures the pigs.

Sports editor: I am told people are already betting on the issue—5:2 on successful capture, 10:1 on the capture of only one pig and 20:1 on someone capturing the pigs and eating them.

Editor: Oh, I forgot that angle. Ring up Manoj Prabhakar and ask him if he can do the story for us—I mean, the betting angle. In the meantime, if only we knew what *India Today* is planning on this issue.

(*Editorial office of India Today*)

Executive editor: I hope someone appoints a commission to inquire into the escape of the pigs. Then we can go for the commission's report and score yet another scoop.

Deputy editor: That will take time. What shall we do now? I would not like to handle this issue. Pigs are pigs.

Executive editor: I am sure that Gujral will have a solution to this problem. I am meeting him at the India International Centre for lunch today and the proximity with the Akalis should give him plenty of ideas on how to handle the pig issue. Let us have a poll, I mean, what do the people have to say on the pigs. We may have to drop Tavleen and Mani, but they would understand.

Chief reporter: We should announce a reward for those who captured the pigs and handed them over to us. Can we call them, 'India' and 'Today'? It would be wonderful to do a cover story on them! •

ILLUSTRATION: DEBASHISH DEB

BOOKS

OF THE WEEK

Experiments with plants

Two books on gardening — one rich in personal experience and the other packed with information — compliment each other

It's interesting to go through Laeeq Futehally's *Gardening* as it does not conform to the run-of-the-mill publications on the subject It reads like a narration — a story that spans years of experience, the fruits of which the writer wants to share with the readers.

Futehally's account of her experiences as a gardener, dovetailed with advice culled from them, give away the sincerity of her efforts in landscaping along the contours and existing plant material Obviously, she was less interested in drastically changing the plant configurations. The book reveals that she was more into 'adding', rather than removing and replacing, which is the essence of good gardening.

She has a flowing, simple and easily-readable style. Her narrative about the small orchard that amply covered the vacant ground and yet formed a divider between the servants' qaurters and the main house; or the skimpy vegetable patch that got converted into a nursery that benefitted the neighbours as well; and the steps that provided an easy access to the garden and served as a feature for the landscape, is just what the doctor ordered. Although you have to read between the lines and infer the hidden tips on gardening.

This is why her style of writing is so distinctly different. It's a trifle illusive, to start with. The thread of narration gets lost somewhere along the way, without having spelt out how to go about producing one or the other style of landscape. The confusion becomes apparent when she talks about the "Mughal style that needs be close to the house and the English style taking over from there on"!

On the whole, pure narration must give way to factual data and specific information which a beginner looks for. That is missing. What to plant is as important as where, how and when to plant, which ought to be the crux of the matter in a garden book.

Those looking for hard-core factual advice about the types of plants to be chosen with reference to a particular region, their nature of growth and nurturing techniques will have to look elsewhere.

In short, the book is a mere narrative about experimenting with plants. The role of food, water and light, so vital for plants, is lost in rhetoric. The purpose of guiding the beginner is lost too.

The last few chapters deal with gardens as environment and public parks. The inclusion of these chapters is a refreshing change — throwing light on areas never taken up in any other garden book. These make a good conclusion.

There is no teacher like experience. Or so the gurus say. How true is it in Brig. Datt's case is evident from his well-illustrated book, *Gardening Hints*. There is no dearth of factual data. And there are no loopholes as far as the inputs regar-

Pure narration must give way to factual data and specific information which a beginner looks for. What to plant is as important as where, how and when to plant, which ought to be the crux of the matter in a garden book

ding light, water, temperature and feed — the four basic requirements — are concerned.

While the author calls this an introductory guide and not a technical reference book, it is fairly well-detailed for any garden planner to refer to. It is well-illustrated and quite specific — but only in the case of annuals. The chapter on flowers is detailed with tips that are usually left out by most Indian reference books. It appears that these details have been gathered over years of experience.

This book surely, is a good foundation guide and is a vestibule for those looking for rudimentary information on just about every aspect of gardening for small home gardens. Explicit instructions on soil mixtures, propagation and multiplication for various types of house plants in the first few chapters are good enough for any garden enthusiast. The chapters on pests and fertilizers are adequate enough for vocational tuition although these are always better understood at the end of the book and not in the beginning.

EXCERPT

We must learn to mix our greens both in colour and texture — the dark glossy surface of philodendrons, the light feathery stuff of ferns, the tough unyielding texture of rubber plants, the graceful but defunct lives of palms and the indefinite swaying moss of grass

While in the first few chapters, the author copiously dispenses gardening hints, in keeping with the title, for some reason (surely, not for lack of knowledge), he seems to have 'switched off' in case of climbers, trees and shrubs. The illustrations and descriptions only refer to their formation and flowering, but not even a hint is given regarding their climatic growth pattern, sowing, feeding or pruning time. These are vital informations which ought to be an integral part of any guidebook.

A very glaring mistake, nay a blunder, has been allowed to pass where the names of trees, creepers, ferns, hedges, house plants are given. A book has to be checked even for oversights.

Both books are informative treatises based on experience. Brig. Datt's book can be called a beginner's guide, whereas Futehally's book is more a gardener's story. •

Manorama Batra

The reviewer heads the horticulture department, Maurya Sheraton Hotel, New Delhi

Gardening *by Laeeq Futehally. Published by HarperCollins. Price: Rs 295*

Gardening Hints *by Brig. (Retd) S.N. Datt, VSM. Published by Nataraj Publishers. Price: Rs 450*

SHORT TAKE

A yen for business

A primer for those interested in trade relations with Japan

Until the early Sixties, the Japanese economic success story stayed confined within that country's borders while Japanese companies concentrated on establishing a solid domestic foundation. Spearheaded by the *sogo shoshas* (the large Japanese trading houses), the following years witnessed a dramatic turnaround in this insular economic approach and, by the Eighties, Japan emerged as the leading exporting nation for an enormous range of products.

As Japanese costs of production and wages rose, Japan Inc. began to outsource and soon emerged as the single largest international investor in a host of countries along the Pacific rim. Even further afield Japan was invariably among the top five investor nations in all major markets. India, however, was not by any means a favoured destination for Japanese investment possibly because of the sequestered nature of the Indian economy. The opening up of the Indian economy since 1991 has, at last, led to considerable Japanese interest in Indian investment opportunities and it is this that makes this monograph, *The Abalone Factor*, so topical. This CII publication is, basically, a primer — a 'how-to-do' business with Japan which, for most Indians is an alien culture in both business and social terms.

Extensively supported by a very informative collection of annexures (ranging from lists of Japanese companies operating in India to Japanese tariffs and quotas), the seven chapters of this monograph act as a solid introduction for anyone interested in doing business with Japan, but not knowing where exactly to start.

In common with most monographs of similar subject nature, it tends to be somewhat dry. Some very amusing and very irreverent, but equally informative monographs are available But all, unfortunately, relate more to educating the westerner rather than the Indian.

Gurjit Singh's introduction to doing business in Japan establishes an excellent foundation, particularly in Chapter 3, titled Entering the Network. As Singh so lucidly and succinctly details, doing business successfully with the Japanese is intrinsically linked to understanding the Japanese psyche, the ethos and culture.

Overall, this monograph is an excellent addition to any business library. It is informative, practically a ready reckoner on proper business deportment and serves very well as an introduction to the underlying financial and business interests of Japanese companies. •

Vikram M. Thapar

The reviewer is joint managing director of Ballarpur Industries Ltd

The Abalone Factor *introduced by Gurjit Singh. Published by the CII*

Keep it up!

Yet another Siliguri girl wins the national women's table tennis title

Till the Seventies, the small north Bengal township of Siliguri was famous for its three T's: tea, timber and tourism. From the late Seventies, the fourth T, i e., table tennis, was added to its cap.

It started with Ganesh Kundu. An ardent disciple of the only woman table tennis coach 'champion maker' in West Bengal, Bharati Ghosh, he became national champion in the sub-junior and junior levels.

Then came Mantu Ghosh, another teenager from Siliguri and again, a product of Deshbandhu Sporting Union under the guidance of Bharati Ghosh. In the late Eighties, Mantu emerged as national sub-junior champion. In the 1990 nationals held in Kanpur, she became the youngest champion in the senior level at the age of 17. Mantu was the national champion again in 1993. She also won medals at the World Railways Table Tennis Meet and at the SAF Games.

This year another teenager from Siliguri, 16-year-old Kasturi Chakraborty, won the national senior title at Jammu. On her birthday, 20 January, she stunned everyone by beating M.S. Maithily in the finals 13-21, 21-11, 21-14, 15-21 and 21-17. In the semi-final, Kasturi defeated former national champion Mantu Ghosh 3-0. Now, she is the youngest national women's title holder. Last December, Kasturi lifted the national junior trophy for the second time.

A student of class X at Siliguri Girls' High School, Kasturi is being trained by Amit Dam at Siliguri Table Tennis Academy. Earlier, Dam had produced champions in the junior level: Sauvik Basu Ray, Kaushik Dey Sarkar, Moumita Dutta, Subhajit Saha and of course, Kasturi. And this year his dream came true with his pupil winning the senior title.

Like a few hundred other boys and girls in this 'town of table tennis', Kasturi started playing the game early — in 1990 when she was only eight. The shy and soft-spoken girl used to go to the academy with her father Kanchan Chakraborty. With an ordinary racket in hand

Kasturi: a promising future

— the girl from a lower middle-class family couldn't obviously afford costly equipment — Kasturi showed her mettle from the very beginning.

Dam, an experienced trainer, noticed her talent. Within two years of coaching, she started producing results. For three consecutive years from 1992, Kasturi won the national crown in the cadet girls group. In 1994, she won the sub-juniors. In 1995, Kasturi bagged the national junior title. In 1996 though, she went through a lean patch. Again in December 1997, she won the junior nationals and finally capped it with the senior crown.

Right now, leaving all the seniors behind, Kasturi is ranked number one in India. Along the way she had to topple star players like Niyati Shah, N.R. Indu, Mantu Ghosh and M.S. Maithily.

According to her coach, Kasturi has all the makings of a great player. All she needs now is more and more international exposure. Kuntal Goswami, secretary of the Siliguri District Table Tennis Association, agrees. •

Iva Guha/Siliguri

Aishwarya Rai may look as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, but don't go by that — in her case appearances are very deceptive. All it takes is the macho Akshaye Khanna to make the former Miss World melt into mushiness.

Aishwarya and Akshaye (even their names seem to go so well together) are quite an item these days, though both are quite discreet about their feelings.

Why they are so circumspect is a matter of some mystery. After all, both of them are single and unattached and don't have to give explanations to anyone.

So what's stopping them from announcing their love from the roof-tops?

Madhuri Dixit is back in the running after the success of *Dil To Pagal Hai*. Though unkind souls continue to insist that Shah Rukh Khan and Karisma had more to do with that than Madhu, there is no denying that Dixit looked better than she has in a long time and performed rather well on camera.

But will this be enough to give her career another lease of life? Or do the rumours that Dixit is all set to marry and settle down in America have a grain of truth to them?

The fact that all the films he produces fail miserably at the box office (*Roop Ki Rani, Choron Ka Raja, Prem*) hasn't deterred Boney Kapoor from turning director. His first movie in this new incarnation will star — who else? — younger brother, Anil. But no, he has no plans to sign up second wife, Sridevi, for the female lead.

Wonder what Bhavna Khosla has that Anu Kuttoor didn't? After all, she managed to get Chunky Pandey to slip a ring on to her finger — something that Anu couldn't achieve in all the years she lived in with Chunky.

Bhavna and Chunky got engaged in great style in Delhi (where the Khoslas live), and it looked as if the entire film industry had flown down to wish the happy couple well.

Clearly, Chunky may not have much of a film career going, but he still wields some clout in the movie business. •

BLUE VEILED (IRAN)

Oriental Magic

RUI KA BOJH (INDIA)

Mrinal Sen: "I am more worried about content"

V RAJAGOPAL

At the IFFI'98, the Asian entries saved the day

Both the closing ceremony and the film were curiously in keeping with the flavour of the 29th International Film Festival, which ended last week. It was like beer gone stale: very little fizz, much flatness.

Though it was shorter and crisper than the over-long, high-on-patriotic-fervour and short-on-films inaugural, the presence of wannabe star Pooja Batra as co-host — keeping the dapper emcee Sunit Tandon company — showed up the festival authorities' rather desperate insistence on glamour.

The motto seemed to be: if you can't get the front-rankers (Manisha Koirala was at hand on the opening day; it is another matter that she melted silently into the night after she lit the lamp), make do with second-rung. Accordingly, the leggy, giggly Ms Batra, outfitted in scarlet and black, fit the bill perfectly.

Also, no other international film festival offers up quite so proudly films made by other countries to open and close the event. The many-Oscar-ed multi-starrer, *The English Patient*, which brought the IFFI'98 to an end may have been the Hollywood biggie (ironically, in Hollywood, its producer, Miramax, has come to be known as a small studio, which makes small-budget movies), but it was a film which would have arrived on the domestic commercial circuit sooner or later. Sooner, actually, in these liberalised, see-the-film-as-soon-as-it-releases-in-the-US times.

Bollywood glamour and Hollywood films used to be the big thing in festivals till a few years ago. This time around, stars from Mumbai stayed away in droves. There was no Dimple Kapadia, hiding behind her designer shades and glorious auburn tresses. Even newcomer Mahima Chowdhury chose not to visit the venue after she graced the inaugural of the mainstream section which showed *Pardes* in which she starred.

Even such staples as Kamalahasan did a no-show.

Among the representatives of Mumbai films who did put in an appearance was Jaya Bachchan who did the obligatory press conference round after the screening of *Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Ma* ("I am open to films which suit me now"). Director Govind Nihalani was a visible presence for much longer, but his hopes for an award in the competition came to naught.

Among others who came and went — catching films, drinking *chai*, swapping stories — were Nandita Das and Joy Sengupta (both star in *Hazaar..*), Kittu Gidwani, who plays the role of a singer-in-search-of-herself very nicely in Rajan Khosa's sensitive *Swara Mandal* (I am thinking of quitting TV), Deepti Naval and Mita Vashisth, Kanwaljeet and ex-actress wife.

The director's corner, invariably on the only sunny patch of the Siri Fort

lawns, was intermittently occupied by Saeed Mirza, a festival regular, and Rituparno Ghosh, whose table took no time in resembling an *adda*, surrounded as he was by vociferous Bengali scribes and fans.

Pamela Rooks strolled in and out of the venue, telling all those who were interested about how her *Train To Pakistan* has been getting cavalier treatment by the censors.

Well-known film-makers from the non-Hindi belt, stars in their own right, went about their business, unobtrusively, promoting their films. Mani Ratnam dropped in on director Malti Sahai's lunch, firmly non-committal about his new film, starring Shah Rukh Khan and Manisha Koirala, currently under production. And that perfectly pleasant paediatrician Dr Santwana Bordoloi, whose *Adajya* deservedly won a special jury award, went her quiet way, taking in as many films as the day allowed.

But this was the inconsequential icing. The real cream was in some of the films, which saved the festival from being a total wash-out. Apart from the films from Sarajevo and the retrospective on Andrez Wajda, the films from Iran were mostly very good, some absolutely first-rate.

Rakshan Bani Etemad, whose being a woman in Iran makes her job doubly difficult, was a member of the jury. She pronounced herself "very happy" that her films were such a hit. So were the films of F. Mehranfar, whose superb *Paper Airplanes* won the Silver Peacock, and Majid Majidi, whose *Children Of Heaven* won the unofficial most-popular film award from all those who saw it.

MARCO POLO (ISRAEL)

CHILDREN OF HEAVEN (IRAN)

HAZAAR CHAURASI KI MA (INDIA)

The films from such other Asian countries as China, Hong Kong and Japan made up the rest of the must-see bouquet. In fact, having seen some of the really good ones (Wong Kar Wai's *Happy Together* and Wu Tianming's *The King Of Masks* which won the top prize, the Golden Peacock), it is evident that Asian cinema, at the turn of the century, is exciting, vibrant, and perhaps more reflective of its milieu than the enervated cinema of western Europe or the derivative, testosterone-pumping cinema of America. If the Indian International Film Festival can consolidate its position as the premier showcase of Asian cinema, as it seems to have set out to do, it will be doing itself a great favour.

And there will be nothing better if the films were carefully and more wisely chosen: there is nothing as appetising as the prospect of good cinema, and nothing so off-putting as encountering dross, even if you get it for free.

We'll let Mrinal Sen have the last word on this, borrowing a statement he made on a Siri Fort II dais last week — "I'm more worried about content, not controversies." •

Shubhra Gupta/New Delhi

ORISSA

Yes, Madam!

Sonia Gandhi's Bhubaneswar visit rejuvenates the state Congress

"We knew that the presence of Sonia Gandhi would make a difference, but it was beyond our imagination that she would sweep the state in this manner," said a visibly-moved Ananta Charan Sethy, Rajya Sabha MP and vice-president of the Orissa Pradesh Congress Committee (OPCC).

Sethy was voicing the sentiments of the entire Congress fraternity in this coastal state of eastern India. In her sixth public rally since embarking on a whirlwind campaign tour, Sonia Gandhi — accompanied by daughter Priyanka — drew record crowds at Bhubaneswar on 20 January. More than one lakh people had assembled at the Kalinga Stadium to greet Rajiv Gandhi's widow and daughter.

The excitement in the state Congress camp had been running high ever since it was announced that "Madam" would be stopping over at Bhubaneswar. The run-up to the rally saw the Congress machinery swinging into action. Despite the ban, imposed by the chief electoral officer, on posters and graffiti at public places, the capital city was decked-up with cutouts, posters, hoardings and banners. Over 20 'gates' were erected by various organs of the party to greet 'the first lady'. While huge cutouts of Sonia and Priyanka adorned AG Square and Rajmahal Square, a cutout of Rajiv Gandhi towered over Gate No. 1 of the Kalinga Stadium.

Chief minister J.B. Patnaik personally monitored the construction of the stage and dais for the special rally. Party workers poured into the capital from all over the state. The mass mobilisation was such that public transport in Bhubaneswar was virtually crippled for two days as most 'town' and 'local' buses were busy bringing in people from various parts of the state.

And it all paid off on D-Day. On the afternoon of the 20th, as Sonia and Priyanka swept into the stadium, mounted the makeshift podium, and waved at the waiting multitude, it was clear thay they were riding a popular wave. The women — who comprised a large section of the gathering — greeted Sonia and Priyanka with their customary ululation and cries of *"swagatam"*. The men hollered *"zindabad, zindabad"*. The atmosphere was electric. And the mother-daughter duo rose to the occasion.

Sonia Gandhi, making her second full speech in Hindi, was quick to strike an emotional chord by referring to the special place that Orissa occupied in the Nehru-Gandhi family history. Reminiscing about how Indira Gandhi had addressed her last public rally at Bhubaneswar and how Rajiv Gandhi had visited Orissa days before his assassination, Sonia said that they had "sacrificed their lives" and she her *"maang ki sindoor"* in the effort to build an "ideal Hindustan". She urged the people to "lend the Congress a hand" in its endeavour to build such a nation and make the dreams of her mother-in-law and husband come true.

THE WAVE: *Sonia Gandhi on the campaign trail*

SURENDRA PATRA

PARTY TIME: *a welcome-arch at the Kalinga Stadium*

"Ab aapki takleeph meri takleeph hai (Now, your troubles are my troubles)," assured Sonia. The crowds lapped it up. The Gandhi *bahu* answered critics panning her 'Italian connection', by declaring: "I consider myself a daughter of Bharat Mata." Those assembled at the Kalinga Stadium that day seemed to agree whole-heartedly.

And if Sonia's emotional appeal moved the multitude, Priyanka's presence pleased the people. Responding to the public demand, she came to the mike and said: "*Orissabasinku more subhokamona* (My best wishes to the people of Orissa)." The crowds went wild.

As did the state Congress leadership. Chief minister J.B. Patnaik took the opportunity to shower praise on "Madam", present her with a silver chariot, and urge her to take over the reins of the Congress. The party was facing a leadership crisis and it was now up to Sonia Gandhi to fill the void left by Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, he felt. A buoyant Patnaik stated that the "demoralised and disillusioned" party rank and file had been rejuvenated by Sonia's visit, and declared that the Congress party was set to sweep the polls in the state. "We will bag all the 21 seats in the coming Lok Sabha elections," announced the CM.

The ground-reality might be slightly different. While the grand success of Sonia's rally has added a spring to every Congress step, it is the split in the Opposition votes that will finally determine if the ruling party can improve on its present tally of 17. Various parties like the Biju Janata Dal-Bharatiya Janata Party combine, the Janata Dal, the Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Samajwadi Party, the Samajwadi Janata Party, CPI(M), CPI, JMM will all field their candidates.

Explains Congress spokesperson Kailash Acharya: "It is never a one-to-one fight in Orissa. Here every political party is interested in putting up candidates in all 21 seats of the state. So it will automatically lead to multi-cornered contests and the Congress is bound to win all these seats."

And how important would the Sonia factor be? Mani Shankar Aiyar, who has broken away from the Kesri-led Congress but remains close to the Gandhi family, told SUNDAY: "What Sonia has achieved is going to exponentially increase the enthusiasm of the Congress party workers and correspondingly dampen the spirit of workers of other parties." •

Surendra Patra/Bhubaneswar

ANDHRA PRADESH

Holding his ground

Former Union minister G. Venkataswamy fights off rival Congressmen and the TDP

Last November, G. Venkataswamy had declared war against former Andhra Pradesh chief minister K. Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy. The former Union minister has been in the news ever since, but invariably for the wrong reasons.

It was at the Lake View guest house in Hyderabad last November, during the organisational elections of the All India Congress Committee (AICC), that Venkataswamy first gave vent to his ire. Angered by the fact that "his men" in the party were being sidelined, he blamed Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy for all the ills plaguing the party in Andhra Pradesh. And despite the best efforts of Congress president Sitaram Kesri, the veteran Dalit leader and Peddapalli (in Karimnagar district) MP refused to patch up with the former Andhra chief minister. With Reddy backing Kesri, Venkataswamy even spoke out in favour of Rajesh Pilot, a candidate for the AICC presidentship.

Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy and his men have hit back by launching a vicious campaign against Venkataswamy. They have been helped by his arch-rivals — the Telugu Desam Party

ACTING TOUGH: *Congress leader G. Venkataswamy*

(TDP) legislators of Karimnagar district. And they have decided to hit Venkataswamy where it hurts: his prized property possessions.

In common Hyderabadspeak, the former Union minister is know as 'Gudusula' (hut) Venkataswamy: the one who sets up a house at every stop! The TDP and Congress leaders have now raked up the 'property' disputes involving the former Union minister. According to his rivals, Venkataswamy's real-estate possessions are valued at no less than Rs 120 crore. He, allegedly, has a house in Chikkadapally, a housing plot in the MLA's housing colony, and a nine-acre plot of land in the posh Banjara Hills colony.

An enquiry commission, in 1988, had hauled up 25 legislators and 30 other prominent politicos for their 'land-grabbing instincts'. After affidavits filed by Venkataswamy and some others had been proved "false", the IX metropolitan magistra-

BLEAK HOUSE: *a 'disputed' property of G. Venkataswamy*

te's court had ordered their charge-sheeting. "When Venkataswamy had move court, the High Court had vacated the stay and permitted the police to file a charge-sheet against the legislator," announce his political foes, to press home their point against Venkataswamy.

Last year, the TDP legislators had organised a *dharna* and protest meeting on Venkataswamy's Banjara Hills' plot. Venkataswamy's son, Vivek, a successful businessman running Vishaka Asbestos, was also embroiled in a controversy in mid-'97, after he hived off a major cement plant near Tandur in Rangareddy district due to investment problems.

But despite all this, Venkataswamy's opponents have failed to nail him. And his is no isolated case. Many prominent politicos — including TDP members and legislators — are, allegedly, involved in dubious land deals. Charges of encroachment by 'power-brokers' on prime land in and around Hyderabad abound, with the N. Chandrababu Naidu regime having given a free hand to its officials.

Venkataswamy's case-history was recently discussed at length during the state Congress election committee meetings. Even though the Congress Working Committee (CWC) had approved the renomination of all sitting Congress MPs, the Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy faction lobbied hard to try and shut the doors on Venkataswamy. But the influential Dalit leader has been renominated.

G. Prakash Rao, a youth Congress leader and ex-Karimnagar legislator, however, feels that Venkataswamy should have retired gracefully after four successful terms. "He is facing such a scandal of land-encroachment in the city, that he should not have contested once again. Rather, he should have allowed a youngster to contest from the reserved seat of Peddapalli," added Rao.

But G. Venkataswamy is ready to renew his battle against his political enemies — both within the Congress and without. •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

Shree 420

The Calcutta Police arrests a master cheat

Nilotpal Bagchi of north Calcutta wanted to be a doctor. But he failed to make the grade in the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) last year. Just when he was about to give up hope, he chanced upon an advertisement in a local daily, and headed straight for the 'National Institute of Education' (NIE) in central Calcutta.

Its owner, Dr Aloke Kumar Sen, confirmed what the ad had promised: a seat in the MBBS course under Varanasi Hindu University. Realising that this could be his last realistic chance of fulfilling his dreams, Nilotpal Bagchi promptly paid up the sum of Rs 3 lakh that Sen demanded, in cash.

Five long months passed, without any sign of the NIE keeping its end of the bargain. An angry Nilotpal then took his case to the police. At around the same time, a similar complaint was lodged by Sangita Jalan of Assam. She had been cheated of Rs 3.5 lakh by Sen who had promised her a seat in 'Mahalaxmi' Engineering College in Maharashtra.

Aloke Kumar Sen was arrested on charges of 'cheating', on 21 January, from his central Calcutta residence. His career as dream merchant began in 1990, when he made a cool Rs 6 lakh by fooling 'budding' doctors and engineers. After the victims complained to the police, Sen

MADHYA PRADESH

Vote for change

A.B. Vajpayee urges the people of Chhattisgarh to back the BJP if they are serious about separate statehood

In his maiden speech as Prime Minister in the Lok Sabha, Atal Behari Vajpayee had disappointed a lot of people in the Chhattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh by not referring to their agitation for a separate state. This was in stark contrast to the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) avowed (and vocal) support for 'Uttaranchal' in Uttar Pradesh and 'Vananchal' in Bihar.

On his recent pre-poll visit to Raipur, the BJP's prime ministerial candidate tried hard to fill in the blank. According to Vajpayee, the omission of the Chhattisgarh issue during his speech had been deliberate. "At that time, it was not clear that the demand for Chhattisgarh had enough public backing," he explained.

Addressing a public meeting at Raipur, he made it clear that the BJP's support to the Chhattisgarh movement would be conditional. "If the BJP wins all 11 parliamentary seats in the Chhattisgarh region, it would be clear that the masses

GIVE-AND-TAKE: *Atal Behari Vajpayee*

SOFT TARGET: *students in Calcutta*

was arrested and later set free.

The saga of Aloke Sen and his brainchild, the NIE, had just begun. Having tasted 'easy' money, Sen was in the mood for more. As he continued to cheat students, his arrest became something of an annual event. He was picked up in 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996 and, now, in 1998.

But why was he let off each time? Explains Subhash Chatterjee, officer-in-charge, anti-cheating section of Calcutta Police's detective department: "According to the Indian Penal Code, if the accused wants to return the money to the complainant, provided the complainant withdraws his allegation, then there is no question of conviction."

That's the clause that Sen has exploited to the hilt. "Aloke Sen is now comfortable with this method. He takes the money, keeps it for some time, gets interest through the bank or wherever he invests it, faces the 'consequences', and then returns the original amount," says investigating officer Bhagirath Ghosh, who is handling the complaints of Nilotpal and Sangita.

Police sources have revealed that Sen often managed to avoid arrest by using the law-clerks and court-staff as his 'informers' after a complainant would bring a case against him before the magistrate. Sen ran the NIE on the basis of his claim that he was a member of the Registration Of The Society (ROS), by which "he has the authority to register any student in MBBS and B.E. in different universities and institutions". Investigations have proved that Sen's ROS certificate is a fake one. His claim of being 'Dr' Sen is also under scrutiny.

Till today, at least 25 students aspiring to become doctors or engineers have fallen prey to Sen's false promises. Many of them have not yet been compensated due to the lengthy legal procedure.

The police have failed to nail Sen as he operates out of various 'front-offices' in states like Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka. It is difficult to coordinate inter-state operations, round up witnesses and prepare a solid case against the master cheat.

So, what will it be this time? Will Aloke Sen be made to pay for his crimes and misdemeanours? Or will it be another classic case of the typically-Bengali saying: *'Aasche bochhor abar Aloke'* (It'll happen again next year)? •

Anuradha Datta/Calcutta

are supporting the demand for a separate state. And then, something definite can be done about it," declared Vajpayee.

Elaborating on the popular demand for Uttaranchal in the hills of Uttar Pradesh, the BJP leader said that the movement had been marked by sustained agitations: demonstration, strikes and firings. It had been granted some political legitimacy by the Uttar Pradesh Vidhan Sabha which had twice adopted resolutions supporting the demand for Uttaranchal, during the tenure of two different state governments. All this proved that the movement enjoyed mass support. The demand for Vananchal in Bihar was of a similar nature, felt Vajpayee.

Not many were convinced about Atal Behari Vajpayee's 'conditions' for including Chhattisgarh in the list of 'serious' statehood movements. Does the BJP want violent protests and bloodshed to be convinced about the seriousness of the demand? No, was Vajpayee's hasty reply, "We want people to express their support to the demand through the polls."

Simply put, Vajpayee's message to the people of Chhattisgarh was: 'Vote for the BJP' if you are serious about separate statehood. •

Manik Madhukar Kher/Raipur

TRIPURA

Red line

The Left Front gets down to business before the Assembly polls

In a significant move, the ruling Left Front in Tripura has dropped ten sitting MLAs from its list of candidates for the Assembly elections, to be held on 16 February. Among the casualties are chief minister and veteran tribal leader Dasarath Deb, and home minister Samar Chaudhuri. The home minister will, however, contest the West Tripura Lok Sabha seat.

According to Left Front convenor Manik Sarkar, who is also the secretary of the state unit of the CPI(M), the CM had himself cried off "on health grounds". Bhudeb Bhattacharya, the CPI(M) MLA of Fatik Roy constituency, was, apparently, axed as he is facing corruption charges, slapped on him after he fell out with industries minister Ratan Chakraborty.

The Left list of candidates for elections to the 60-member

Cross-country communication

A unique mail exchange programme at the Indo-Tibetan border brings two people closer

Bhumraj Gurung is a postman with a difference. He is also a cross-country runner with a difference. This diminutive Sikkimese, in his mid-40s, acts as a bridge across the man-made boundary that divides India and Tibet.

Twice every week, the Indian post and telegraph department employee crosses the Indo-Tibetan border at the famous Nathula Pass post, some 52 km from Gangtok. His mission: to unite relatives and friends separated by a barbed wire. And in this, he has the full sanction of both governments.

Under an agreement between Indian and Chinese authorities in 1992, a programme involving the transfer of mail across the Indo-Tibetan border was introduced. The exchange programme was implemented at the Nathula Pass border post, which had witnessed the clash of Indian and Chinese troops in 1967. This post — at an altitude of over 14,000 feet — has been paid special attention by the Indian Army, ever since. The border is totally sealed to cross-border traffic. Bhumraj Gurung is, of course, an exception.

On Thursdays and Sundays, Gurung, in full uniform, arrives at the Nathula post. At exactly 8.30 am, he crosses the international border and makes his way to a shed on the Chinese side. Mailbags are exchanged without a word

BETWEEN THE LINES: *the Indo-Tibetan border*

being spoken. The job done, Gurung crosses back into India at 8.33 am. Yes, the entire procedure takes precisely three minutes.

"It is a very short process. We just exchange bags and leave the shed. There is no conversation whatsoever, as my Chinese counterpart speaks only Chinese and I speak Nepali and Hindi," reveals Gurung, a resident of Sherathang, one of the few hamlets dotting the landscape along the Indo-Tibetan border.

"People in this region have relatives on the other side and vice versa. They are mostly Tibetans who migrated to India during the 1960s. Keeping in mind these close trans-border family ties, this exchange programme was initiated," explains the Nathula post commander.

The importance of this programme is best summed up by Gurung himself: "If it wasn't for this mail exchange, letters would take months to reach their destination on both sides. In the normal course, a letter would go from Sikkim to Delhi, Hong Kong, Beijing and then reach Tibet!" •

A. Chettri/Gangtok

SAFETY FIRST: *Left Front convenor Manik Sarkar*

Assembly figures 17 new faces — 14 from the CPI(M), two from the CPI, and one from the RSP. The CPI(M) will be fielding 54 candidates; its coalition partners RSP and CPI two each; and the Forward Bloc one.

A deal with the Janata Dal is yet to be struck. In the last elections, the Janata Dal had won the Barjala seat as a coalition partner of the Left Front. According to Manik Sarkar, Janata Dal and CPI(M) leaders were still trying to work out a poll alliance. If things do work out, the Barjala seat (kept vacant till now) will go to the Dal.

Left Front convenor Manik Sarkar will contest the Dhanpur seat, in place of Samar Chaudhuri. Sarkar, who had earlier contested the 6 Agartala constituency, has been shifted to a "safer constituency".

Badal Chaudhuri, the sitting MP from West Tripura, has been given the Hrishyamukh Assembly ticket. This marks the former agriculture minister's return to state politics and he is being projected as the next home minister. Badal Chaudhuri's track-record as agriculture minister and parliamentarian has prompted this move.

While the Left Front has finalised its list of candidates and hit the campaign trail, the Opposition Congress is struggling to get its house in order. The Tripura Pradesh Congress Committee (TPCC) chief Gopal Roy left for Delhi on 14 January with a list of 250 prospective candidates! The Congress has decided to field 45 candidates. Its electoral allies, the Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS) and the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV), will account for ten and five seats respectively.

Meanwhile, three former TPCC chiefs, Sudhir Ranjan Majumder, Samir Ranjan Burman and Ashok Bhattacharya, have openly revolted against the present TPCC leadership. They have demanded the immediate dissolution of the 33-member election committee headed by Gopal Roy.

The Congress' electoral alliance with the TUJS has also run into trouble. The TUJS has openly criticised the Congress for reducing its share of seats and giving too many seats to the TNV. According to TUJS secretary Rabindra Debbarma, the TNV will fare very poorly in the elections, and hamper the chances of the Congress-TUJS combine as well.

With the Opposition failing to get its act together, the ruling Left Front can well afford to try out some new tricks. •

Jayanta Bhattacharya/Agartala

TELEVISION — SHUBHRA GUPTA

Planet Ruby

Ruby gets to do some 'real' acting

And now, ladies and gentlemen, Ruby as Cop! Roll up, grab a seat, and catch the action.

See Ruby on horseback, galloping on the beach, the Arabian Sea a magnificent backdrop. See her in police uniform, working the wireless, bending near a corpse, jawing with a wise-guy...Is there no end to the lady's talent?

It figures, actually. All these years of trailing microphones on campus, on the street, or on psychedelic sets, must have taken a toll. By her own admission, she doesn't want to do Hindi movies, because she feels that the poor heroines wear these obvious clothes and sing silly songs.

I'm not sure that she'd be such a misfit, though. Anyone who saw her do a recent *BPL Oye* in a nifty *lehenga-choli* warbling away in the back of a bullock-cart, will believe that she can do a Mumbai film-style village belle quite happily.

As SP Sahiba, she gets to do some 'real' acting in *Yeh Hai Raaz*, newly begun on STAR Plus. That is, she has to look grim and serious and yell at lowly *havaldars* and

A NEW ROLE: *Ruby Bhatia*

sundry thugs, during most of the proceedings. Only in one scene does she wear an eye-popping strawberry sheath: in the rest she dresses in dull khaki. She also frowns a lot. That must make for quite a change from what she usually does, which includes major amounts of giggling.

The serial is directed by Karan Razdan, who is an old hand at doing crime on TV (he was the man behind *Tehkikaat* once Shekhar Kapoor gave up on it), so we should get some interesting situations. The man who plays Ruby's partner-in-crime, a small-time thief, is Aly Khan, and he has done some interesting things in the past.

They've even got around Ruby's strange accent by making Khan comment cheekily on her Hindi which sounds remarkably like English, as opposed to those people whose English sounds like Hindi. Now they've got-to-do something about Ruby's acting. Once that is sorted out, *Yeh Hai Raaz* may turn out to be worth looking at.

One thing is for sure, she delivers a mean roundhouse kick. •

SUNDAY WEEK

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 1 FEBRUARY, 1998

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

Success comes from doing one thing at a time, and doing it well. Don't burden yourself by taking on more than you can handle. Loved ones may be talking more than they actually should. Their personal likes and dislikes can erect a barrier between them and reality, and, therefore, distort facts.

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

People in authority probably will not mind being disturbed if there is a pressing need to speak to them. Even so, try to handle emergencies or other situations yourself. Family members appear to be in a spirit of agreement and goodwill. Your love life can take a distinct turn for the better.

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

Feel in control of things and on top of the world. Your cheerful mood can be infectious. People in positions of power and authority should respond well to your positive approach and happy countenance. You can win over influential allies. Your love life is surely going to take a turn for the better.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

Keep additional money that you make in a savings account. Minimise unnecessary spending. Youngsters may be mischievous and may get into trouble unless their energies are channelised into constructive activities. Don't sign agreements or contracts.

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

Don't get too excited about new developments in property affairs. Deals and agreements can fall through just at the last moment. Projects that have overrun the time allotted them may have to run on for a little while longer. You may fall behind schedule at work. Change course in employment affairs.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

Steer clear of provocative statements or controversial subjects. People may protect themselves in rather violent and unpredictable ways if they feel you are getting at them. It is a time when your tact and diplomacy can help you avoid trouble.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

Look for pleasure in the simple things of life. Make the most of the company around you. Conversing with acquaintances can be rewarding. Others may have instructive stories to tell or valuable experience to pass on. Books can be a source of inspiration and interest in this subdued and calm week.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

Social gatherings have to be attended out of a sense of duty, but they are likely to be dull. Your personal freedom may be impeded. Family members can contract worrying symptoms or serious ailments; special treatment and nursing is required.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

Go by your instinct rather than rationalising; you will probably only be chasing your own tail if you do the latter. Emotional problems can seem intractable, but spontaneous actions or statements can produce just the right effect. Temptations to lay out large sums of money should be avoided.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

New ventures and initiatives are likely to get off to a lively start. You may be offered a share in an enterprise just begun by friends and associates. Don't take an overly independent line in joint financial affairs. Attempts to force the pace or hurry people up will only lead to further delay.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

Great satisfaction can be derived from doing work, however menial. Business trips can be entertaining. Creative interest or hobbies can be turned into money-making schemes. Legal rulings are likely to go in your favour. You may have outgrown old and valuable relationships and friendships.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

You should be left to your own devices. But problems can arise because boredom sets in. You can land into trouble by looking for excitement. And what's more, you may drag your friends and companions into deep waters along with yourself. •

The outsider

So there is some chance for Kamal Chaudhary after all.

The air force pilot who gave the services up to jump into elections at Rajiv Gandhi's invitation moved out of the Congress into the BJP. He was to be the BJP's candidate in Hoshiarpur, which was to be the constituency of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader Kanshi Ram.

However, Kanshi Ram has developed a cold feet because the BSP unit in Hoshiarpur is badly divided.

Kanshi Ram: developing cold feet

As a result, the BSP candidate from Hoshiarpur is to be Col. Charandeep Singh Kamboj. That he's the reason for the division in the BJP is another matter.

Which is music to Kamal Chaudhary's ears because a weak candidate against him means he is better placed to win. Chaudhary has won from Hoshiarpur several times, though he had lost the last two elections.

So the BJP is going to get one more seat. At least, that's what Chaudhary is hoping.

> HEARD AT THE BJP HEADQUARTERS
>
> **Every saint has a past and every sinner a future.**
>
> A BJP GENERAL SECRETARY, JUSTIFYING THE CANDIDATURE OF SANJAY SINGH FROM AMETHI

The Maratha war

Suresh Kalmadi's decision to leave the Congress has transformed political equations in the Pune Congress(I). Recently, Sharad Pawar, once the reason for Kalmadi's political success in Pune, went to the city to campaign *against* his protege.

Which is probably why Congress spokesman V.N. Gadgil has a permanent smile pasted on his face these days. Not one election has gone by without Gadgil having made one or two snide remarks about Marathas from Baramati. But just a week ago, not only did Sharad Pawar and Gadgil share a dais, but Gadgil was full of praise for the 'strongman of Maharashtra'. That's how quickly moods—and views—change in the Congress.

Trojan horse

Hats off to P.G.R. Scindia. The minister in the Karnataka government is efficient, but knows exactly which side of his bread is buttered.

Till recently Scindia, a Maratha who claims he is from the backward class, was assuring union minister R.L. Jalappa that he would back him in the revolt against the autocracy of H.D. Deve Gowda (Jalappa joined the Congress recently in protest against the high-handed ways of Deve Gowda and his sons). Scindia told him he would support Jalappa till his dying days, that Deve Gowda was a crooked little so and so, etc.

But in the past couple of weeks, when Jalappa finally decided to actually implement his decision and tried to contact Scindia, the latter

Deve Gowda: beware!

wouldn't take his calls. The reason became clear recently: when Scindia announced that he was going to be an unofficial election agent to one of Deve Gowda's sons.

That's fine — Scindia just changed his mind. But that isn't the end of the story. A few days ago, Scindia was heard telling one of his friends with great angst, that he was acting as election agent all right, but he was going to make sure the 'rascal' sons of Deve Gowda lost in the election. "While I'm there, they (the Deve Gowda family) shouldn't expect to win," he is reported to have said.

How's that for intrigue? ■

CHECK-LIST

Film stars and political parties: who's where

The Bharatiya Janata Party: Has a galaxy of movie stars, especially from the south — Goutami, Vijayashanthi and courtesy ally Jayalalitha, will have many campaigning for it. Vinod Khanna is the latest to join from the north. If you want an acting career, BJP's the party to join.

The Samajwadi Party: Raj Babbar has stuck on in the Samajwadi Party, despite some tensions, and several other stars are reported to be thinking about campaigning for the party after it has proved it can take on the Shiv Sena in Bombay.

The Congress(I): Had Rajesh Khanna and Sunil Dutt, but has lost both because of ineptitude. Vaijayanthimala Bali is still active because she believes in the Congress, not because of any efforts by the party. On the whole, the Congress seems to have left Bollywood cold in this election.

The Janata Dal: There are no stars in the Janata Dal — or everyone is an actor, depending on how you look at it.

Free ride

It seems the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has a soft spot for ministers holding the railways portfolio — because it seems to have taken a policy decision not to set up candidates against railway ministers.

The Samata Party, a BJP ally, has decided not to set up a candidate against Ram Vilas Paswan from Hajipur. C.K. Jaffer Sharief may contest from one of the two constituencies in Bangalore, but the BJP is yet to decide on whether it will field a candidate against him.

Madhavrao Scindia: challenging Vajpayee

Suresh Kalmadi is contesting as an Independent, but the BJP is not seriously interested in fighting him.

That only leaves out Madhavrao Scindia from Gwalior. The former railway minister had thrown down the gauntlet before the BJP by challenging Atal Behari Vajpayee to contest from Gwalior — and the BJP hasn't picked it up. So railways is clearly a portfolio the party loves.

The other side of Mulayam

Say this for Mulayam Singh Yadav — he may not have been India's most successful defence minister, but he never lets down old friends.

> HEARD AT 24 AKBAR ROAD
>
> **In the US, courtship has acquired a new dimension. There, it is called billing and suing.**
>
> A CONGRESSMAN ON CHARGES OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT AGAINST US PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON

Recently, he went to Kanpur to take part in a function organised by the air force. A large lunch had been organised for the visiting minister. Mulayam demurred. "*Bhai* I am going to have lunch with Tyagiji," he said motioning to an officer, whose brother and Mulayam had studied together.

Over lunch, Mulayam's friend mentioned that his younger brother was about to retire. "Retire? How can that happen. I'll make sure he doesn't," thundered Yadav and called the services top brass to demand an explanation for the retirement of his friend's brother, much to the embarrassment of the officer.

Mulayam Singh Yadav: a friend for life

Of course, the air force prevailed upon Mulayam and explained that there were some things even a minister wasn't allowed to do. But with Mulayam, if you're a friend, you're a friend for life.

CHECK-LIST

Who is writing Sonia Gandhi's speeches?: the list of suspects

- **H.Y. Sharada Prasad:** Used to write erudite and educated speeches for Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. But denies flatly that he has been roped in for the same job by 10 Janpath in this election.
- **Suman Dubey:** Journalist, mountaineer and Doon school pal of Rajiv Gandhi's, the suave Dubey is said to put together inputs provided by various people. But it is hard to associate him with the *'mera suhaag chhin gaya'* type of speeches.
- **Najma Heptullah:** Provides background material and the context of the speeches made by Sonia Gandhi. For instance, she suggested that Sonia go to Bhubaneswar where Indira Gandhi made her last speech about the 'last drop of blood'. But her inputs are processed and developed.
- **Sheila Dixit:** The only Hindi-knowing person in the 10 Janpath set up — and as Sonia Gandhi is making most of her speeches in Hindi, Sheila Dixit liaises closely with Sonia Gandhi.

Captain, oh captain!

Capt. Satish Sharma is a worried man these days — or not, depending on the way you look at it.

While the candidate for Rae Bareli has been decided (Deepa Kaul, former UP minister and daughter of Sheila Kaul, former union minister), the Congress candidate for Amethi is yet to be decided.

It could be Sonia Gandhi — or Satish Sharma. The Congress high command has

Satish Sharma: a worried man

decided that Amethi will be the last seat to be announced. So Satish Sharma is like a cat on hot bricks. He doesn't know, in this case, whether he's standing or sitting.

While he'll be happy to vacate the seat for Sonia Gandhi, he's acutely conscious that in four out of five Assembly segments last time, it was the BJP and the BSP which won. The longer it takes the party to decide, the less time he has to campaign.

But then, that's the way the Congress is.

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Thums Up Swadeshi?

Industry feels the heat of international competition and clamours for protection

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Gulf War Part-II

Saddam Hussein is the only one who wants a US air-strike. And if it happens, it could start a world war

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Terms of endearment

Muslims in Uttar Pradesh begin to accept the BJP's 'moderate face'

Cover artwork: Santosh Dutta

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Editor: Vir Sanghvi

'V' for Vajpayee

Your cover story, *The search for a PM* (1—7 February), was timely and informative. With his political experience and the clean, respectable image he enjoys, Vajpayee seems the right man for the job. His earlier stint as foreign minister during Morarji Desai's tenure should also stand him in good stead. There's another aspect to it. The BJP is the only party which at least presents a united face, that is despite all its inner squabbles. What India needs now is stability, economic and political. And Advani and Joshi, whatever the latter's popularity may be within the party, understand this very well. So if Vajpayee becomes PM, we can expect a truly 'united front' at the Centre.

Manoj Kejriwal, Bilaspur (Madhya Pradesh)

■The search for the Prime Minister who would lead India into the 21st century has begun. But is there really any need for a search? Considering the complexities that the country is facing, it's obvious that only the BJP can give India a semblance of stability. All the rest are mired in their own political babble. Vajpayee is one of the few decent guys of Indian politics and his past experience adds validity to BJP's claim.

Sankhya Sen Gupta, Calcutta (West Bengal)

Ill-fated accord

Your story, *Mission impossible* (11—17 January), deserves kudos for its brilliant analysis of the Indo-Sri Lankan accord and its aftermath. It's clear the accord was signed without LTTE supremo Prabhakaran's concurrence. Perhaps, Rajiv Gandhi was in too much of a hurry to claim credit for having solved the 'Sri Lankan ethnic problem'. He must have thought that if the Punjab accord with Longowal and the Assam Accord could come through why not the Indo-Sri Lankan accord as well? Maybe, Rajiv signed the accord more from internal compulsions. Crucial 'revelations' were beginning to appear in the Bofors controversy and his relation with some of the beneficiaries was being openly talked about. So the Sri Lankan Accord seemed a possible escape route. But at what cost? Some 3,000 Indian soldiers and officers paid with their lives in an alien terrain. Rajiv himself became a victim. Maybe, all this could have been avoided if the accord wasn't signed.

Kalyani, Srirangham (Tamil Nadu)

Vajpayee: face of unity

Sonia Gandhi: can she do it?

Let's not get swayed!

This refers to your story, *The Sonia show* (18—24 January). Sonia certainly came and saw. But has she conquered at Sriperumbudur?

According to your report there were about 10,000 people at the rally. But the fact is most of them were Congress workers and much of the gathering was mobilised with the TMC's tacit support. So does it really show the abundant love and affection the people of Tamil Nadu have for the Nehru-Gandhi family?

Sonia married Rajiv in 1967 but retained her Italian citizenship till 1984. When Rajiv became PM in 1984, Sonia got her Indian citizenship as the PM's wife couldn't be a 'foreigner'. Where does all this leave her claim that she became a part of India 30 years ago?

She may draw huge crowds but whether she succeeds in translating them into votes is another question. Indians now are wary of dynastic appeals. And the Nehru family isn't the only one to have sacrificed for the country.

L. Rohini, Tiruchy (Tamil Nadu)

■If Afghans, Persians and Moghuls as invaders successfully ruled India for centuries and later became Indians by marriage or otherwise, why not give Sonia a chance as she has sincerely integrated herself into Indian life and society?

C.P. Mathews-Merkle, Genthod-Geneva (Switzerland)

Castles in the air

Jitendra Prasada seems to be under the illusion that he is No. 2 in the Congress (*Always the bridesmaid; never the bride* 25—31

January), but what he fails to realise is that the party does not even have a definite No. 1. The cards are on the table of 10 Janpath, and are played at the mistress' discretion. Unfortunately, these men who cannot even stay united within their own party daydream of establishing a securely united India.

Bedashruti Mitra, Raigarh (Madhya Pradesh)

Stop the plunder

The story *Himalayan plunder* (18 — 24 January) with its shocking revelations of human depredations on the forest wealth of north Bengal is illuminating. It's amazing how people have ruthlessly exploited the region's natural wealth crippling national treasures.

Greed and avarice of some unscrupulous people have accounted for the steady depletion of the area's natural reserves despite the best efforts of police, forest and excise officials to nab the smugglers. It's clear that a more concerted effort is necessary to root out this malaise.

Bhupen Bose, Calcutta (West Bengal)

The Hegde factor

This refers to the story *Taste and talent* (18 —24 January). Ramakrishna Hegde's decision to forge an electr l alliance with the BJP ma, augur well for his party, Lok Shakti. Hegde has an image and a mass base and his decision has made people sit up and take notice. Politicians find justific ations for shifting sides and for Hegde it clearly is a case of throwing down the gauntlet to Deve Gowda who had him expelled from the Janata Dal. Even R.L. Jalappa left

Hegde: the sophisticate

the Dal and joined the Congress to fight Deve Gowda.

For the BJP too, allying with Hegde has definite plus points. Hegde's standing as a clean politician who advocates value-based politics dilutes the taint of communalism that its opponents cast on it. More so because Hegde has clear perspectives and doesn't indulge in election rhetoric. On issues like economic independence and minority rights Hegde is clever enough not to say anything that might put him in a spot. As you rightly say, Hegde has the talent of saying a lot without actually saying anything.

A. Jacob Sahayam, Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala)

Little knowledge

Kaajal Walia's article *Pack-up time* (18 — 24 January) has at least one glaring error. The piece opens with a line of the famous Mohammad Rafi song *'Bichhade sabhi bari bari...'* which the author wrongly assigns to the Guru Dutt film *Pyaasa*. That the mistake is because of the author's ignorance is confirmed by its repetition in the very next paragraph. "More than 40 years later, that song from *Pyaasa...*"

For your information, this beautiful Rafi number, written by Kaifi Azmi and set to tune by S.D. Burman, is from another Guru Dutt classic *Kagaz Ke Phool*.

One feels today's journalists are not only ill-informed but callous as well. Factual errors, sad to say, occur regularly in premier magazines. Does it indicate the general tendency to short-cuts, the modern maxim of maximum gain with minimum sweat?

Sharad Rajimwale, Jodhpur (Rajasthan)

Contributed by Bikash Pradhan, Calcutta (West Bengal)

The Samaritan

The story, *The good Bangalorean* (4 — 10 January) provides a welcome relief from the endless media accounts of VIPs and self-serving politicians. Mahadeva's mission to give decent burials to unclaimed corpses makes a touching story.

Maybe, Mahadeva initially took up the job to make both ends meet. Even then it shows his essential altruism. More so when we are compelled to see how even septuagenarians and octogenarians scramble for the least crumbs of wealth and power. It's good to see someone different.

Amarnath Kamat, Bombay (Maharashtra)

Hung again!

Your story *Zero sum game* (14 — 20 December 1997) deserves praise for its incisive analysis of the political situation in the wake of the dissolution of Lok Sabha. The outcome of the sum game is going to be zero as all the opportunist political parties are engaged in exploring possibilities to forge 'unholy' alliances to grab power.

With the election just a few days away, the country seems headed for another hung House. It is deplorable that all the political parties still keep blaming each other for forcing an election without bothering to come out with a clear-cut strategy to wipe out corruption and bring stability — both political and economic.

Anil Ramchandra Tonre, Pune (Maharashtra)

In the story, The Car Man *(25 — 31 January), the photograph of the car that has appeared on page 13 is not Tata Mint as captioned. It is D'arts, Daewoo's smaller car. The error is regretted. — Editor*

MILESTONES

REJECTED: by Assam Governor Lt.-Gen. (retd.) S.K. Sinha, on 5 February, the CBI plea to prosecute chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, in the multi-crore LoC scam, on the ground that there is no prima facie evidence against the CM.

INAUGURATED: by Prime Minister I.K. Gujral, India's first 24-hour news channel, named Star News, on 3 February.

ANNOUNCED: by Indian cricketer Sanjay Manjrekar, on 5

February, in Bombay, retirement from first class cricket.

APPOINTED: B. Narasimhan, as chairman of Food Corporation of India, on 4 February. He is a 1964-batch IAS officer belonging to the Gujarat cadre.

APPOINTED: Manish Gupta, as chief secretary, Government of West Bengal. He succeeded Anish Majumdar who retired on 31 January.

RE-ELECTED: M.G. Damani, as president of Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE), on 2 February. This is his third stint as BSE president.

DIED: Animesh Chandra Ray, former chairman of Calcutta Port Trust, in Calcutta, on 2 February. He was 62.

SIGHT & SOUND

SUDHIR TAILANG/THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

■ When the United Front decides its Prime Minister, we will see...If it's offered to me...I have never shirked responsibility. I shall certainly accept it if it is offered.

JYOTI BASU, *senior CPI(M) leader, ruling out the possibility of a national government in the event of a hung Parliament after the polls*

■ I will be an Indian as long as I breathe. I am not only the daughter of Bharat *mata* but it is the land of my *suhaag* too.

SONIA GANDHI, *reacting to the BJP's description of her as a 'foreign hand'*

■ **That the Congress has neither the respect for the political culture nor the same for the great Indian culture is evident because its leaders are repeatedly knocking the doors of 10 Janpath.**

ATAL BEHARI VAJPAYEE, *BJP's prime ministerial candidate, speaking at a rally in Bihar*

■ I made a mistake by helping Deve Gowda to be Prime Minister.

LALOO PRASAD YADAV, *former Bihar chief minister, at a rally in Jamshedpur*

■ The rest of India will watch closely. I want to know what is going to be Tamil Nadu's reply to the Jain Commission.

I.K. GUJRAL, *Prime Minister, campaigning in Tamil Nadu*

■ I was made to feel guilty because I smoked, drank and had boyfriends...maybe I'm a bit too honest for this profession.

POOJA BHATT, *film actress*

THE STAGE IS SET

Sushma Swaraj is sure that this time the Muslims too will vote for her

RUPINDER SHARMA

ALREADY A WINNER: *Sushma Swaraj with her Muslim 'sisters'*

What was it about Sushma Swaraj? The hardcore BJP rhetoric in modulated, convincing tones, the temple-hopping devout Hindu, the graceful, almost beautiful woman — whatever it was, she managed to draw the crowds even before her rally had really started. Eight o'clock on a cold, weekday morning — housewives, office-goers, children — they were all there.

Victory, she knows, is a foregone conclusion. The middle-class Hindu families in Satya Niketan, the well-to-do *sardars* of Fatch Nagar, the not-so-well-to-do families in a transit camp in Tagore Garden — they welcome her with folded hands and adoring eyes. She moves regally amidst them — draped in printed pure silk, complete with *sindoor* and *bindi*.

Sushma Swaraj has only one challenge in front of her — the Muslims of Okhla. No, they are not crucial to her south Delhi seat (she won in 1996 despite losing by 1,247 votes in Okhla to a Muslim Independent). "Last time, I won despite them. This year, I want to win with them," she says, in-between smiling benignly at a group of doting women, and fielding a volley of flowers from somewhere above her.

She probably will. Not that she has particularly endeared herself to the Muslim community in Okhla. "In these two years nothing has changed," says Yusuf, a young artisan. "Even now, so many of us don't even have electricity in our homes. Many of our colonies in Okhla Vihar are still not recognised by the government."

Yet, the Muslim vote here will go to the BJP this time, he says. Despite the neglect. Why? All things being equal, is the Congress not the more secular of the two?

Advani *jo bhi karta hai, khule aam karta hai. Congress ke mafik hamare peet peeche tala to nahi khol deta hai* (Whatever Advani does, he does it openly. At least, he doesn't open the lock behind our backs, like the Congress does)," Yusuf says quietly.

She came in two hours late to the Ramlila grounds in Okhla. The cold and the long wait had taken their toll and her well-rehearsed, fiery speech was heard by a dwindling crowd, without emotion.

It did not matter. The mandate had already been given. •

Chitralekha Dhamija/New Delhi

She faces only one challenge — the Muslims of Okhla. "Last time, I won despite them," says Swaraj. "This year, I want to win with them"

The organiser

How V.S. Achuthanandan *has hijacked the CPI(M) in Kerala*

The face of the CPI(M) in Kerala used to be the octogenarians, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, the party ideologue, and E.K. Nayanar, the chief minister. But equations in the party have changed after the state committee elections at Palakkad in January. For those who thought V.S. Achuthanandan (72) was down and out, it was a big mistake. The Politburo member is back with a bang.

He has virtually taken over the party after Palakkad. For the last five years, Achuthanandan has been passed over in the party owing to the machinations of Namboodiripad, Nayanar and the powerful CITU lobby headed by E. Balanandan.

Achuthanandan has been portrayed by his partymen as a 'Stalinist hardliner' with no sense of humour and some even dubbed him as a casteist. They said Achuthanandan, who belongs to the backward Ezhava community, wanted to be chief minister.

So far, though the CPI(M) vote-bank in Kerala predominantly comprises the Ezhavas — the single-largest community in the state — only a Brahmin like Namboodiripad or a Nair like Nayanar has been made chief minister.

In fact, the CPI(M) won the 1987 Assembly elections promising its government would be headed by K.R. Gowri, an Ezhava woman. But the upper-caste leadership made Nayanar chief minister in the last minute. Subsequently, the veteran Gowri Amma had to leave the party in disgrace.

The CPI(M) lost the 1991 elections mainly due to the Ezhava factor. So, when elections were announced for the Assembly in 1996, the party leadership tacitly spread the word around that this time Achuthanandan would be made the CM.

An overconfident Achuthanandan, contesting from the Marxist stronghold of Mararikulam in his home district of Alapuzha, neglected his own constituency while campaigning for others. As a result, his party won the elections but he was defeated. It was also alleged that the CITU members, under instructions from Balanandan, voted en bloc for the Congress candidate.

Says Achuthanandan: "What happened at Mararikulam is that a small disgruntled group — which is there in all political parties — sabotaged my election." He claims he was not aware of this group before as he was busy campaigning in other parts of the state.

RAVISANKAR K V

The marginalisation of Achuthanandan was total after his defeat at Mararikulam. The CITU lobby wanted Susheela Gopalan, wife of the legendary A.K. Gopalan, as the chief minister.

It is of course another story that Achuthanandan tactfully backed Nayanar who was not even a member of the Assembly to thwart the CITU design. But Nayanar later changed sides and with the help of the CITU lobby (read industry minister Susheela Gopalan, fisheries minister T.K. Ramakrishnan, former Left Democratic Front convener M.M. Lawrence and Balanandan) started cutting Achuthanandan down to size.

Critics deride Achuthanandan as a former tailor who never went to school. The fact is that when he was only 11 years old, he was drawn into the party which was at that time banned in the Travancore area of Kerala. He rose from the ranks, which is one reason why he has a better understanding of the party apparatus at the grass-roots level.

The pro-CPI(M) publications in Kerala hardly ever write about Achuthanandan. For, unlike EMS or Nayanar, he does not provide them with 'good copy'. When he makes statements, they are buried in the inside pages of the newspapers which also have an upper-caste bias. So Achuthanandan has remained the party's permanent No. 2. His aloof and reserved manner gives the impression of a cold and unapproachable sort of fellow.

But the real Achuthanandan is a far more complex and interesting individual than what is made out to be. His unquestionable links with the grass roots have enabled him to achieve what EMS and Nayanar failed to do. He nailed Congress leader K. Karunakaran on corruption charges in the palm oil deal when Karunakaran was the chief minister and Achuthanandan the Opposition leader (1991-96).

About a year back, he embarrassed the Nayanar ministry by raising serious questions on the way irrigation minister Baby John had handled the Mullaperiyar interstate water issue. Achuthanandan alleged that Baby John had sold out to the Tamil Nadu government because his children had business interests there.

And within the party, when the CITU lobby with the blessing of EMS and Nayanar tried to bring in the Muslim League to the CPI(M)-led LDF on the eve of the Lok Sabha elections, Achuthanandan fought tooth and nail against it and won.

"A section in the party wanted an electoral understanding with the Muslim League but I was opposed to it because it will only fan majority communalism. The CPI(M) will never have any understanding with the Muslim League or any other communal party," said Achuthanandan.

He explained, "Unless we maintain the secular democratic fabric of India, there cannot be any development. To enhance the party's tally in the Lok Sabha, no such compromises with communal parties should be made."

party elections.

The CPI(M) leadership's claim of absolute unity in the party lay in tatters after the axing of the CITU bigwigs (Balanandan and Lawrence) at Palakkad. Balanandan alleged that it was a total takeover of the party by the Achuthanandan group and the elections "violated established norms".

But sitting in his modest office at the AKG Centre in Trivandrum, the state CPI(M) headquarters, Achuthanandan says: "It is but natural that some people may not like me but still the party is above any individual. I think Balanandan has withdrawn that statement."

RAVI SANKAR K V

Sitting in his modest office at the AKG Centre in Trivandrum, the state CPI(M) headquarters, Achuthanandan says: "It is but natural that some people may not like me but still the party is above any individual"

Achuthanandan has worked his way up the party by garnering support at the grass-roots level and captured the organisation through party elections at the district committee levels which finally paved the way for his group's victory at Palakkad. He took revenge over his detractors as he got them defeated in the

Suddenly, the heat is on Nayanar who stands to lose his job. Achuthanandan has that ineffable talent of saying a lot without saying anything. At a meeting of party cadres in Kozhikode, he reportedly said that the Lok Sabha elections will be a referendum on the performance of the Nayanar ministry. This has been lapped up by the Congress.

It is a foregone conclusion in party circles that if the LDF does not improve its tally of ten seats in Kerala, Nayanar would be shown the red light. Achuthanandan is waiting for the signal to turn from amber to green to get the top job which has been denied to him all these years. •

Sreedhar Pillai/Trivandrum

Gender barrier

Political parties ignore the candidate fielded by women's groups

Party manifestos on women:

• *"The Congress party will launch a campaign for ending discrimination against women and girls through a process of education, empowerment and provision of legal rights."*

• *"The Left parties have been the firmest champions of women's rights and for ending gender discrimination."*

• *"The BJP believes that true human development cannot take place without the empowerment of women."*

Sounds great in theory. But reality speaks otherwise. And the fact that women's organisations have not handled this too well only makes the situation more complicated.

Last month, women's groups in Delhi got together to make a statement — a 'political statement' — saying that despite parties not conceding them 33 per cent reservation in Parliament, they would go ahead and win the elections. So, they collectively fielded Ranjana Kumari, the director of Centre for Social Research.

However, it all fizzled out in the end.

On the last day of filing nominations, the 16-member core group set up by the organisations decided to withdraw Ranjana. "We appealed to various political parties to support our candidate. But when that did not happen we withdrew our candidate," says Mohini Giri, chairperson of the National Commission for Women (NCW).

It was first decided as a symbolic gesture of solidarity to get together and field a candidate. Women representatives of mainstream political parties were not consulted to make a point that the support of political parties was not important.

The NCW issued a statement saying: "Women have spoken with one voice rising above party lines. The candidature of Ranjana Kumari is a symbolic step and will demonstrate to the world the efficacy of women's voice and the importance of creating a proportionate space for them in electoral politics."

However, the same organisations that talked about rising above party lines withdrew their candidate saying that support was not forthcoming from political parties. "The fact that they (political parties) did not consider the request for a single seat in Delhi proves the point that the promise of one-third seats in Parliament is a hoax," argues Ranjana.

"When it comes to the crunch these men hide behind a Sonia Gandhi, or a Rabri Devi in Bihar or a Jayalalitha in the south," says Ranjana

But couldn't she contest as an Independent? "They made a fool of themselves. They should have fought it out — without thinking of winning or losing," says an angry activist.

On the one hand, marginalisation of women MPs within their parties is a big issue with these organisations. On the other, they turn to the same parties for support. Moreover, none of them has a clear strategy.

"Maybe we should have a twin strategy. Those who have the courage should fight independently and those who cannot should come through the political parties," says Ranjana.

What do the political parties have to say on the issue? "At the grass-roots level there is resistance against fielding women candidates," complains Sushma Swaraj of the BJP. "And then winnability becomes the crucial factor," she adds. As far as the women's wing of the BJP is concerned, they are busy organising *khichri banao* programmes in villages besides distributing unadulterated *sindoor* to women.

Pramila Dandavate and Mrinal Gore from the Janata Dal were denied tickets. The excuse was of course 'health problems'. Najma Heptullah of the Congress threatened to sit on a *dharna* if the percentage of tickets to women candidates did not go up.

A rather sad commentary on the state of affairs. "When it comes to the crunch these men hide behind Sonia Gandhi, or a Rabri Devi in Bihar or Jayalalitha in the south," says Ranjana.

Sounds like good rhetoric. •

Anuja Pande/New Delhi

INDER MALHOTRA

Playing it safe

The BJP's election pledge on nuclear policy is cautious and ambiguous

Whatever may be said about the BJP's programme in other respects, on the vexed nuclear issue it has displayed commendable consistency as well as realism in recent years. Thus it is that, unlike the Congress and the United Front, which are conveniently quiet on the nuclear dimension of national defence, the saffron party has once again committed itself to exercising the nuclear option. In its election manifesto, it has declared clearly that a BJP-led government will induct nuclear weapons and go ahead with the development and production of the intermediate-range ballistic missile, Agni.

However, the BJP's election pledge on nuclear policy too is hedged in by caution and ambiguity. For instance, about nuclear testing, the 55-page manifesto says nothing. L.K. Advani, when pressed on this point, stated that he was not an expert but had been advised that to exercise the nuclear option it was not necessary to test.

The party's reason for treading rather softly is simple and obvious. There is enormous international pressure, especially from the United States, against India going overtly nuclear. It is no secret that in recent weeks American diplomats have been making anxious inquiries about a BJP government's nuclear policy. When told that the BJP might do whatever was necessary to make India a declared nuclear weapon power, they have been working overtime to dissuade the BJP leaders and the permanent security establishment from "going beyond the present stage of preserving the nuclear option".

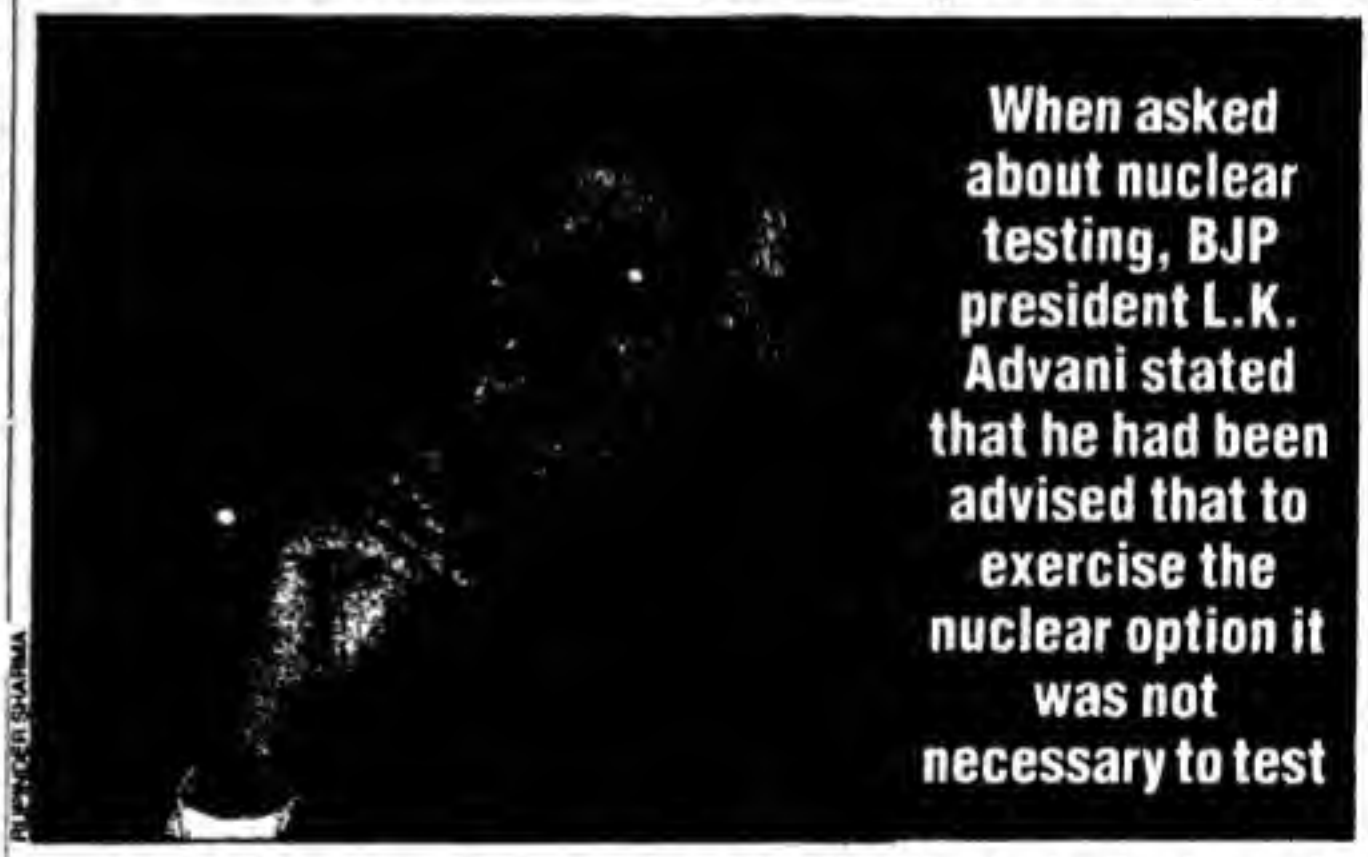
It was not fortuitous that a couple of hours before the release of the BJP manifesto, the US ambassador to this country, Dick Celeste, spoke in Madras about the "consequences" of the exercise by New Delhi of the nuclear option. To nobody's surprise, he spoke of "very unsettling" after-effects in terms of both India's relations with neighbouring countries and ties with the US. And he added, for good measure, that the US would have to take action enjoined by its non-proliferation laws. A similar message, in even more polite language, was delivered a few days earlier by the US assistant secretary of state, Karl F. Inderfurth, in an interview to an Indian magazine.

Both Inderfurth and Celeste are, of course, duty-bound to further their country's hyper-hypocritical nuclear policy. But shouldn't they sometime talk of the very unsettling effect of China's great and growing military might, Pakistan's development of nuclear weapons which it says it cannot give up even if India abandons its nuclear option, and, above all, the brazen China-Pakistan cooperation in both nuclear and missiles fields?

President Clinton has issued China a certificate of innocence in relation to its activities to proliferate weapons of mass destruction. American anxiety to make big money by selling China civilian nuclear technology may be understandable. But countries whose security is directly affected by what goes on between Beijing and Islamabad are bound to feel differently. Incidentally, American officials have been stating, especially after defence secretary William Cohen's visit to the Chinese capital, that China has undertaken not to give any nuclear assistance to Iran. But not a word about the status of Chinese nuclear help to Pakistan.

It is in this context that the BJP government, provided it is voted to power, will be judged by its deeds, not by its words. When, in 1977, Atal Behari Vajpayee became foreign minister, his party, then called the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, was also committed to making the bomb. But he was so overawed by Morarji Desai's firm opposition to nuclear weapons that he reversed his party's position. Vajpayee has been more outspoken lately. But it cannot be forgotten that during the tenures of both P.V. Narasimha Rao and Inder Kumar Gujral, he could never be persuaded to sponsor a parliamentary resolution clearly spelling out the country's nuclear goals.

In any case, the real issue at present is not induction of some nuclear weapons, announced or unannounced, but the development and serial production of Agni. Pakistan has already declared that on 23 March it would put on display its latest missile, Ghauri, with a range of 1,500 km. After that day the proof of the pudding will lie in eating it, not in the claims about the cook's culinary skills. •



When asked about nuclear testing, BJP president L.K. Advani stated that he had been advised that to exercise the nuclear option it was not necessary to test

PURNENDER SHARMA

Gulf War Part II?

Saddam Hussein is the only one who wants a US air-strike. And if it happens, it could start a world war

One of the few bright sides of the Gulf crisis in 1990 following Iraq's occupation of Kuwait was the abundance of Saddam Hussein jokes. A popular joke which did rounds was about a visit by Tariq Aziz, then Iraq's foreign minister, to the US to negotiate with the United Nations.

Aziz, goes the joke, returned to Baghdad from New York and rushed to Saddam to tell him what he saw in the Big Apple and other American cities where he was in transit.

"Saddam," Aziz told his Supreme Leader breathlessly, "George Bush has done the ultimate in personality cult in America. On every door in the US, the President has inscribed his name and no American can overlook their President at any time of the day."

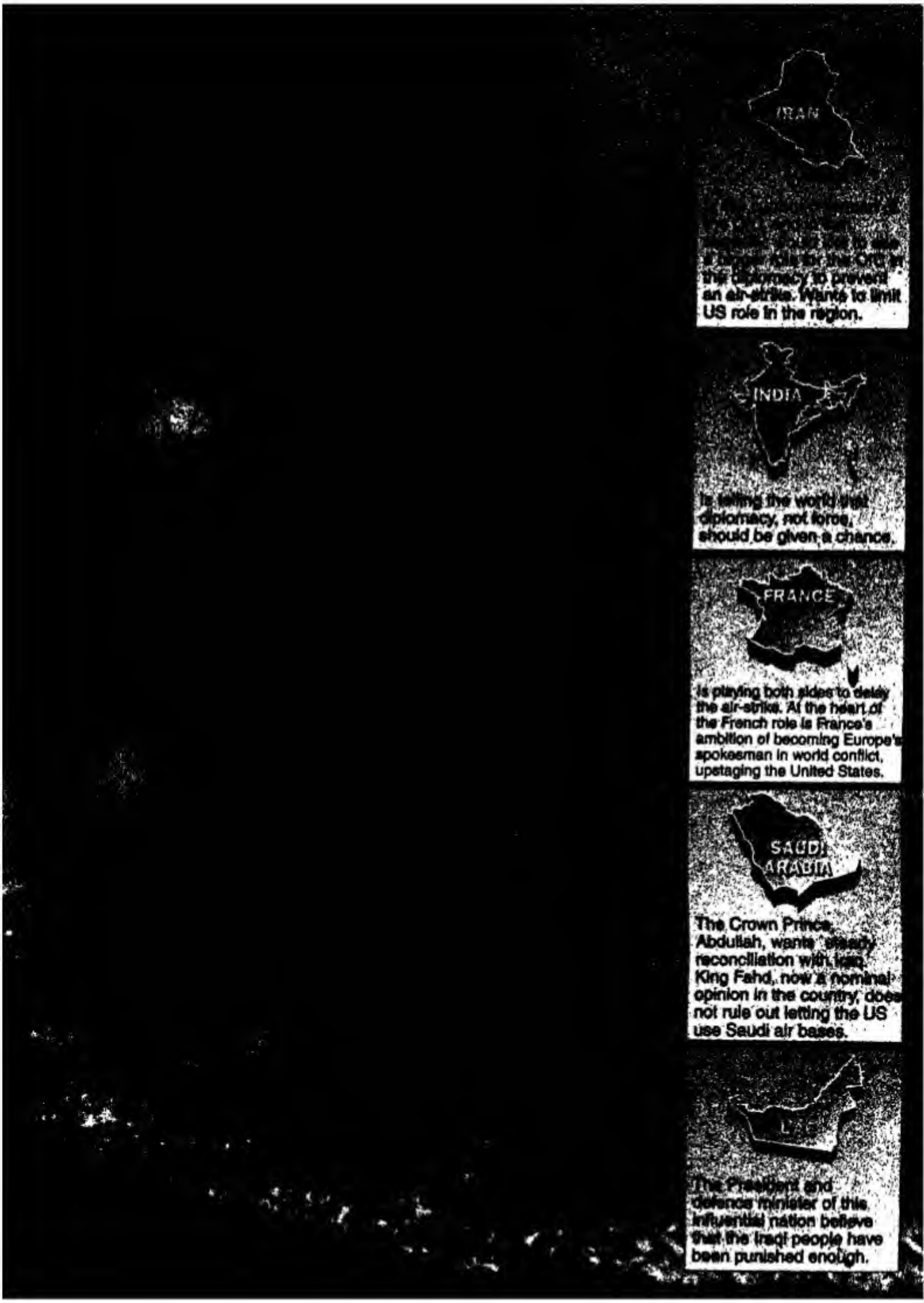
Aziz was obviously referring to doors in public places where the 'Push' signs are prominently posted on one side. In Arabic, there is no 'P' sound and Arabs pronounce the letter 'P' with the sound of 'B'.

The joke has it that within 24 hours, the Iraqi President had every door in Iraq prominently painted with the sign 'Saddam' on one side.

The joke is relevant today because the latest crisis in the Gulf, prompted by Iraq's refusal to let UN weapons inspectors have their way, is the result of Saddam's congenital inability to understand the world outside his over-protected, paranoid and unnatural environment inside plush palaces and bunkers, kept in place by the elite Republican Guards.

SADDAM HUSSEIN

He never travels abroad for fear of being overthrown while he is out of the country. As a result, his understanding of what the outside world thinks and does is entirely second or third-hand



Is telling the world that diplomacy, not force, should be given a chance.

Is playing both sides to delay the air-strike. At the heart of the French role is France's ambition of becoming Europe's spokesman in world conflict, upstaging the United States.

The Crown Prince, Abdullah, wants steady reconciliation with Iraq. King Fahd, now a nominal opinion in the country, does not rule out letting the US use Saudi air bases.

The President and defence minister of this influential nation believe that the Iraqi people have been punished enough.

THOSE WHO DON'T WANT A WAR

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faced the threat for the first time last week. "We estimate that the possibility that Iraq will attack Israel is minimal. But our responsibility commits us to prepare for that possibility, small as it may be," he said grimly, in his first straightforward acknowledgement that a US air-strike on Iraq could lead to retaliation which could include the use of missiles armed with bacteriological or chemical warheads on Israel.

As the world waits for someone to light the match, it is clear that no one is particularly keen to see a conflagaration caused by the collision of the United States and Iraq. Least of all, the United States itself.

Secretary of state Madeleine Albright is speaking brave — and sometimes harsh — words. However, United Nations officials feel that Albright's determination to make Iraq see sense — by diplomacy or by force — is just bravado.

In the US, Democrat opinion acknowledges privately that President Bill Clinton is at his most vulnerable, faced as he is by the fallout of the sex scandal involving a White House intern. He could, under pressure, take unpredictable steps. Any move that could take the US closer to an air-strike on Iraq must be made with great caution and care, because the US would be a loser.

This sounds hard to believe, given the US bragadoccio and its stated determination to make Iraq toe the UN line on weapons inspection. However, opinion in the Middle East is dangerously close to turning against the US if it attacks Iraq. And US policy-makers feel they cannot afford to alienate Saudi Arabia, for instance, which has refused to loan its air bases to the US in the event of an air-strike.

Besides which, can the US really afford the odium of killing a few women and children who would be no loss to Saddam Hussein but would project the United States as a ruthless villain?

Madeleine Albright: determined to make Iraq see sense

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, is also said to be quietly warning the United States about the international fallout of an air-strike. The Arab-Israeli peace process could come under severe strain if the United States decides to enforce the will of the United Nations on Iraq.

And what about India? Though it doesn't count for much, a war between the US and Iraq could be disastrous for India. Not only would it push up oil prices and India's import bill, but also could support to Saddam Hussein be a factor in wooing Indian Muslims? Conscious of all these factors, India is lobbying as hard as it can to prevent a war.

Saddam Hussein never travels abroad for fear of being overthrown while he is out of the country. As a result, his understanding of what the outside world thinks and does is entirely second or third-hand. Except for a few hand-picked aides like Tariq Aziz, now deputy Prime Minister, Saddam does not allow his men to go abroad either, more so after his two sons-in-law defected to Jordan some time ago on a trip which was ostensibly to Bulgaria.

Saddam presides over what is probably the most repressive regime that the world has seen since the collapse of the Third Reich. Under his dispensation, Iraq is not ruled just by any clique of loyalists, but a close-knit group of

Bill Clinton: he could, under pressure, take unpredictable steps

people drawn from Takrit, that part of Iraq where Saddam comes from. They are known as Takritis.

It is inevitable that in this kind of a closed-shop *junta*, truth almost never filters to the ears of the ruler. Dictators like Saddam Hussein only get to hear what they want to hear.

It is this handicap — and the inevitable miscalculations as a result — which prompted Saddam to invade Kuwait almost eight years ago. The Iraqi President mistakenly believed that Kuwaitis would rally around his son-in-law, whom the invading forces had installed as the new strongman in Kuwait on 3 August, 1980.

Instead, he found to his dismay that the people of Kuwait, in spite of their differences with the emir, stood up to the invaders, though they were hopelessly

outnumbered and handicapped in terms of arms and ammunition.

Similarly, Saddam erroneously believed that the people of other Gulf countries, ruled by Emirs and kings, would rise up in revolt once he declared an end to family rule in Kuwait. Instead, he found to his dismay that the only people who supported him were the Palestinians in Kuwait and elsewhere. But then, the Palestinians have a history of biting the hand that feeds them, be it in Kuwait, Lebanon or Jordan.

But his worst miscalculation was that the coalition for liberating Kuwait, led by the US, would not go to war with Iraq. This miscalculation proved to be his undoing and pushed the hapless Iraqis into years of unprecedented misery.

Just as the Iraqi President grievously erred in 1990, he is clearly miscalculating again. A few statements here and there expressing sympathy for the plight of the Iraqi people or a keen desire in some capitals to see that the US does not hold sway in the Gulf have led Saddam

Kofi Annan has taken the unprecedented step of warning Iraq about the consequences of defying the world body, and thereby international opinion

to believe that he can have his way eight years after he marched into Kuwait. Events unfolding in the last fortnight have shown that Saddam is once again a victim of the world as he sees it.

Just as it is necessary to recall the past in order to understand Saddam's mindset, it is also necessary to go into the genesis of the current crisis in order to understand its denouement.

After the Gulf War for the liberation of Kuwait, Iraq agreed to ceasefire terms set by the UN, which required Baghdad to destroy weapons of mass destruction, which were part of its arsenal. Iraq also agreed to weapons inspections under the aegis of the UN to ensure that it is prevented from developing any capability for biological, chemical and nuclear weapons.

Initially, Iraq cooperated with the inspectors, primarily because they did not come up with much evidence that could do significant damage to Iraq's weapons potential. But things changed in 1994, and since then the UN teams have considerably hampered Iraq's capability to acquire weapons of mass destructions.

This explains the shift in the Iraqi position in 1997, when they started obstructing the work of UN teams. Last year, when Iraq bundled out American inspectors on the UN mission, Russia intervened and brought about a temporary end to the crisis.

But as recent developments show, the story has by no means ended. The central fact in the current Gulf crisis is that

The wrong man

That's what I.K. Gujral is when it comes to affairs of the Gulf

Prime Minister I.K. Gujral was in the thick of electioneering when the latest crisis in the Gulf took an ominous turn, making an Anglo-American air-strike against Iraq a distinct possibility.

Gujral, whose first love is foreign affairs, took time off the campaign trail to dash off letters to the heads of state of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council: the US, Russia, the UK, France and China.

When he was Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao had ended a curious disease which had afflicted South Block since Jawaharlal Nehru's time. The most obvious symptom of this disease was a tendency in the foreign office to speak out of turn on any issue anywhere in the world, no matter whether it affected India or not.

Rao is a man of few words: he made it incumbent on South Block to restrict India's 'words of wisdom' to global situations which demanded them.

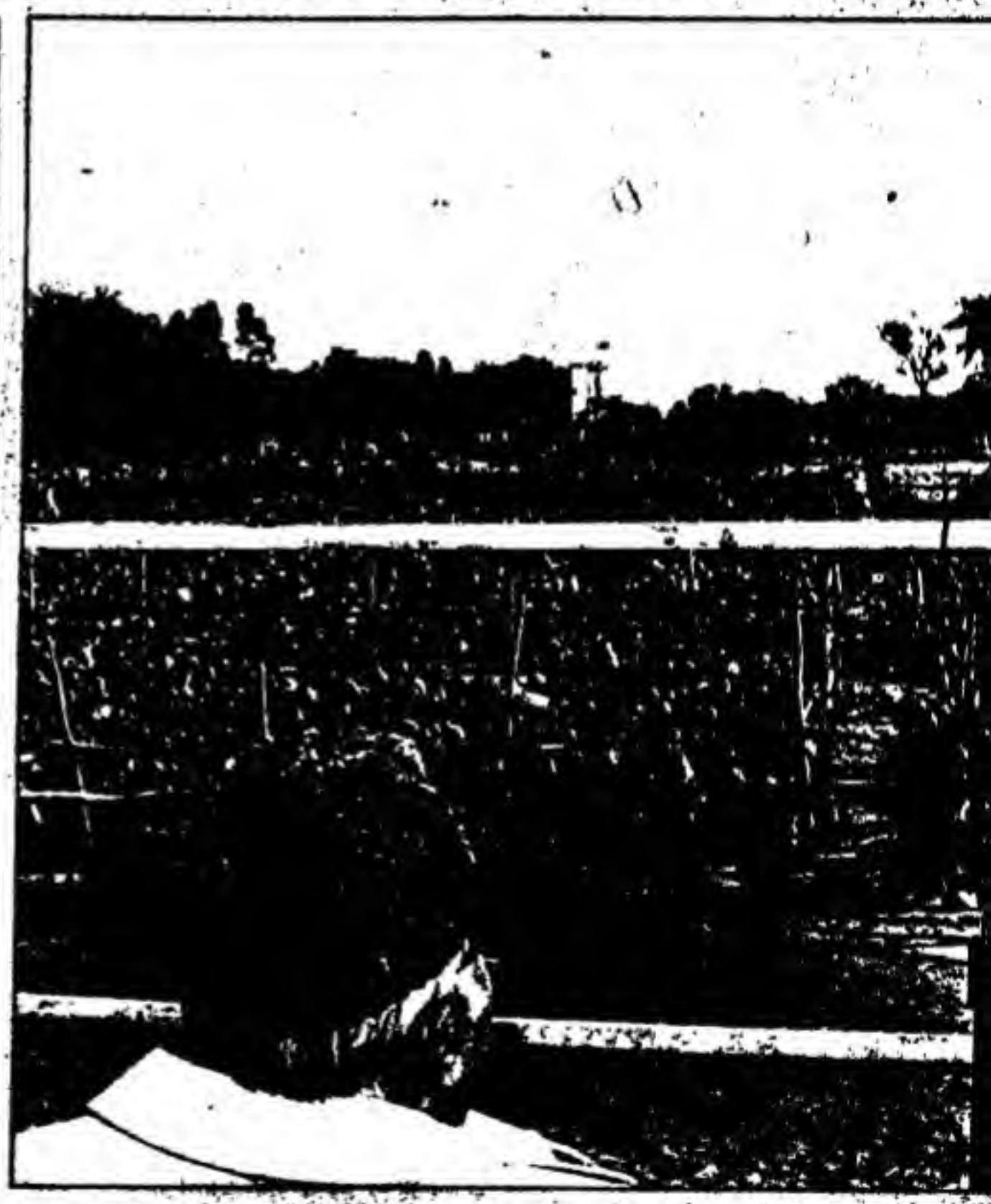
Gujral is the exact antithesis of Rao in this regard. Garrulous both in private and in public on foreign policy issues, the Gulf crisis was a godsend for the Prime Minister.

Less charitable critics of the Prime Minister maintain that Gujral, who is uncomfortable with the rough and tumble of electoral politics, was only too happy to get a reprieve and return to his first love, albeit briefly.

Others say it was a welcome diversion from the mess in Jalandhar Gujral finds himself in, unable to criticise the BJP and having to put up with Mulayam Singh Yadav's vitriol whenever the defence minister rings up the Prime Minister.

But was the Prime Minister's high level intervention in the Gulf through letters to president Bill Clinton and four other powerful heads of state ill-advised? Does India have any role at all in the current crisis in the Gulf?

The mandarins of South Block maintain that with or without Gujral, India should have its say on a crisis like the latest one in the Gulf. They



Whether it is in the eyes of the US state department or Whitehall, or the Saudi or Kuwaiti foreign ministries, Gujral has absolutely no credibility where the Gulf is concerned

argue that India [illegible] and "vital national [illegible] Gulf. To [illegible] of cowardice, [illegible] to the memory of [illegible] Bandung, [illegible]

[illegible] been visiting Iraq have come [illegible] with the assessment that New [illegible] must position itself to claim a [illegible] of the reconstruction and other [illegible] of love, as and when the UN [illegible] are lifted. They see India's

signs in UN secretary-general Kofi Annan's recommendation that the oil-for-food deal for Iraq be enhanced from its present limit of $ 2.14 billion to $ 5.2 billion over six

months.

Teams of businessmen who have been going to Iraq have come back and reported that India is being shut out of Iraqi business altogether because it has not reciprocated a number of initiatives from Baghdad to improve bilateral exchanges.

There is yet another consideration, albeit mercenary, in wanting to improve relations with Baghdad. The Iraqis owe Indian companies anything between $ 750 million and $ 1 billion for projects executed when Iraq was a thriving oil exporter before the Gulf War. The exact figure

[illegible] is subject to the [illegible] and penalties.

But remember that unless there is an effort on the part of the government to cosy up to Iraq, there is no hope of ever recovering that money from Saddam Hussein.

They may well be true. But India's tragedy is that when it comes to doing anything at all in the Gulf, Gujral is the wrong man to initiate it.

Whether it is in the eyes of the US state department or Whitehall, or the Saudi or Kuwaiti foreign ministries, Gujral has absolutely no credibility where the Gulf is concerned. The shadow of Gujral's infamous hug of Saddam Hussein still looms large over any potential Indian initiative in the Gulf.

Shortly after the UN resolutions on Iraq were in place following the Gulf War, Saddam sent his foreign secretary to New Delhi in an attempt to restore relations to pre-war levels. The visiting official tried every trick in the diplomatic book to extract an invitation for the Iraqi foreign minister to visit India.

But the then foreign secretary, K. Srinivasan, was very firm. He said issues such as debts to Indian companies had to be sorted out before any such invitation could be issued by South Block.

Gujral has tried to move away from this policy and uphold his well-known softness for the Baghdad regime. After all, a leopard does not change its spots. In recent months, Gujral has received the speaker of Iraq's rubber stamp Parliament and MPs in New Delhi.

Shortly before New Year, he wanted to send a high level delegation to Baghdad — the first since the Gulf War — to be headed by a secretary to the Indian government. Fortuitously for India's relations with the rest of the Gulf, the secretary who was to lead the delegation fell seriously ill 15 minutes before he was to depart for the airport on that trip. Otherwise, the secretary's presence in Baghdad, with the latest crisis building up, would have been like a repeat of Gujral's presence in Baghdad as the Iraqi army was pillaging Kuwait nearly eight years ago.

Iraq is at fault. Having agreed to UN resolutions and consequent UN inspections, Iraq cannot shirk that responsibility. Nor can it dictate to the UN Security Council how the resolutions are to be implemented.

The tragedy of the current crisis is that the Iraqi regime is equating sympathy for the Iraqi people with sympathy for Saddam's dictatorship. Recently, when a drive was organised in the UAE in support of malnourished Iraqi children, it fetched a whopping two million dollars in public donations in just two days. But such demonstrations of generosity are, by no means, an indication of support for Saddam's political motives.

Just as it is necessary to recall the past in order to understand Saddam's mindset, it is also necessary to go into the genesis of the current crisis in order to understand its denouement

This explains why the Russians who brokered last year's compromise and opposed the use of force only a fortnight ago have shifted their position and is advising Saddam to cooperate with weapons inspections.

This also explains why UN secretary-general Kofi Annan has taken the unprecedented step of warning Iraq about the consequences of defying the world body, and thereby international opinion.

Even France, which was ambivalent about the course of action to be followed to make Saddam fall in line, has moved closer in recent days to the US position.

The best examples of how far removed from reality the Iraqi regime has been in its assessment of the situation is provided by the peace initiatives by Turkey, which has vital interests in Iraq, and Egypt which sees itself as the Arab voice in the crisis. The advice from both Cairo and Ankara to Baghdad has been to return to normal business with the UN inspectors. •

K.P. Nayar/New Delhi

Damning dossier

The US slams the Sheikh Hasina regime for human rights abuse

It's tough times ahead of Bangladeshi PM Sheikh Hasina. In the balance-sheet that the Clinton administration has prepared on the Awami League's first 18 months in power, Hasina's government has come under fire for gross human rights violations.

On 3 February, in an unprecedented move, senior American diplomats called a press conference to highlight the human rights abuses of Hasina's government, hinting that Dhaka faces a possible cut in the 300-million dollar economic assistance from the US. Bangladesh receives an annual 65 million US dollars as bilateral aid and the rest through multilateral agencies.

The report censures Hasina for refusing to scrap the non-bailable Special Powers Act (SPA), saying that the Awami League government still uses the 1974 legislation to detain political non-conformists without formal charges or any specific complaint.

A look at the statistics: The Hasina regime, according to the report, has detained close to 3,500 people under the act, while 23 deaths have been recorded in police custody in 1997. Damning revelations certainly, if true. It doesn't stop at that. "There are credible reports that the Awami League government uses the SPA primarily as a tool to harass and intimidate its political opponents," the report further states. That isn't all, either. The Hasina government, it alleges, detains and arrests people even without using the SPA to intimidate perceived opponents and their families.

Some instances:

• In July last year, the Dhaka police detective branch raided the house of Saquib Chowdhury the night before his marriage to the daughter of Khondker Abdur Rashid, one of the accused in the Sheikh Mujibur Rahman murder case. The police, having no search or arrest warrant, claimed that the occupants of the house possessed illegal arms. Chowdhury, his father and five guests were detained for several hours during which they were interrogated on the whereabouts of Rashid rather than on illegal arms.

• The report refers to the cases of two accused in the Mujib murder case — Lieutenant Colonel Syed Faruq Rahman and Jobaida Rashid. The state department notes that Faruq, who was arrested in 1996 under the SPA and later charged with the 1975 murder of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was subjected to torture as were the four other accused.

The Hasina regime, according to the state department report, has detained about 3,500 people under the SPA, while 23 have died in police custody in 1997

Jobaida Rashid, whose husband was one of the accused and had fled Bangladesh, was arrested under the act after she publicly defended her husband's actions. She also was tortured in prison before the Supreme Court ordered her release.

Even mediamen are not spared and there have been instances of attacks on journalists by government officials and party activists. A journalist who was critical of Hasina's policies says that he and his family members have been harassed by the intelligence services. Another journalist said that he received telephone threats from a security official, after he wrote an expose on the misuse of government resources by the PMO.

Sheikh Hasina has also come under attack for refusing to redeem her 1996 pre-poll pledge that she would scrap the Vested Property Act (VPA) under which hundreds of thousands of Hindus lost their land-holdings to the tune of about one million acres. Property ownership among the Hindus in Bangladesh has been a thorny issue since its independence in 1971 when many of them lost their holdings. There are, at present, about 20 million Hindus living in Bangladesh.

Hasina also comes under criticism for her government's reported denial of entry to the representatives of Amnesty International.

It's clear that all's not well with the Hasina regime. Suspicious of political opponents and at the receiving end of the US ire, Hasina has to act fast if she has to wriggle out of the mess. At stake is the massive US aid that Bangladesh gets. Or else, her own regime is in danger of being branded as a garbage worth dumping — her very own words, about the earlier regimes that ruled Bangladesh in the past two decades. •

Rahman Jahangir/Dhaka

RAJIV SHUKLA

Netting the big fish

The EC is preparing a list of criminals participating in the current polls

It is good that the Election Commission is preparing a list of criminals contesting in the current Lok Sabha and Assembly polls. The EC is picking up details about these candidates from various magazines and newspapers. Accordingly, the EC observers have been directed to submit reports on them. Also, the concerned district magistrates have been asked to submit history sheets of such candidates.

The EC is of the opinion that any candidate, either elected or defeated, will come under the preview of section 8 of the EC code, and suitable action will be taken against him. If any elected candidate is found to be convicted by the appropriate court earlier, his election will be declared null and void.

The EC has come to know that almost all the prominent parties including the BJP, the Congress and the United Front have fielded candidates with dubious records. Now, it is to be seen whether they have been convicted by the appropriate court or not.

The EC has even urged the voters not to vote for the criminals through Doordarshan. This time a maximum number of central forces are being deployed throughout the country during the polls to stop the undue interference of state governments through the police. That is why the poll schedule has been staggered.

Meanwhile, the EC has decided not to hold any Assembly polls before October. Elections are due in November in five states including Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The chief ministers in these states are waiting for the Lok Sabha results. But chief election commissioner M.S. Gill is in no mood to conduct any Assembly polls between May and September as the weather condition during this period may not be conducive to holding elections.

Elections in these states are due in November and according to the Constitution their Assemblies must be constituted by December. If any chief minister was in a hurry to hold the polls, he should have had recommended the dissolution of the Assembly by last month like the chief minister of Himachal Pradesh. Then it would certainly have been easier for the EC. But now, it's too late.

CEC M.S. Gill: against the criminalisation of politics

Immediately after the Lok Sabha elections, the EC will be busy with biennial polls to the Rajya Sabha which are due in March as new members are to be elected before 2 April.

Meanwhile, the EC has also decided not to allow political parties to advertise on satellite channels. In fact, the Union finance ministry had approved of the proposal of various political parties to sanction foreign exchange for advertisements on satellite channels during the elections. The finance ministry had fixed a limit of Rs 2 crore to each party for this purpose.

When the finance ministry sent this proposal to the EC, Gill turned it down saying that it will not provide a level playing ground. According to him, only the big parties will be able to avail of this facility while the smaller ones will be deprived due to lack of funds. Though, the amount earmarked was Rs 2 crore for every party. And this would have helped the parties reach out to a larger audience through television.

It is unfortunate that the EC is doing nothing to increase the turnout in the polls. There was a suggestion that those who do not vote should be deprived of various facilities like ration cards, bank loans etc. But the EC is not in favour of this idea. Also, Gill has not agreed to make voting compulsory. •

THE BJP MANIFESTO

Some priority items on the national agenda

- Ensure day-to-day working relationship with Indian industry through a structured forum like the MITI in Japan
- Disinvest in non-strategic PSUs
- Control and rationalise subsidies and trim all except those that benefit the weaker sections
- Institute an effective anti-dumping machinery
- Make 9th Plan an employment-focussed Plan

On liberalisation and globalisation

- Rapid, large-scale internal liberalisation, but calibrated globalisation
- Indian industry to be protected from global competition for seven to eight years to give it time to integrate with the global economy

Foreign direct investment

- Ensure FDI flow to priority areas and to supplement national efforts in infrastructure
- Restrict FDI in non-priority areas and in areas where domestic industry is functioning well
- FDI will be encouraged to promote exports rather than target the domestic market
- FDI will be welcomed in non-predatory role in joint ventures with local industry

Industrial policy reform

- Industrial Development and Regulation Act will be replaced by an Industrial Development Act
- Special importance to small-scale and cottage industry. Upper investment limit of Rs 3 lakh may be downgraded. And tiny sector relieved of labour laws

Infrastructure

- All eight fast-track power projects to start construction in 1998
- All things being equal, preference will be given to Indian companies in power generation and distribution
- Nuclear power programme to be restarted

Thums Up Swadeshi?

Industry feels the heat of international competition and clamours for protection

"Indian industry has been protected until 1991. Suddenly to throw open the whole thing to global competition is not right. Till '91 we couldn't expand, we couldn't diversify. It wasn't industry's fault. Our economic policy should take this aspect into account." — L.M. Thapar to SUNDAY

"I am not against foreign investment. I am against MNCs. The government should support Indian industry instead of going begging before multinationals. They should not be encouraged. Otherwise Indian industry will fail." — Rahul Bajaj in a TV interview

There are others. Some like K.K. Modi have made their views public. Many more are complaining in private. Indian industry has had two bad years in a row and is running scared. A lot of industrialists are also heading for the BJP, hoping to find some relief under its *swadeshi* umbrella.

The fears are grounded in fact. Once the initial reforms were in place, Indian industry really took off. Between 1993-96, it grew at an exemplary average rate of 10 per cent per year. And the liberalisation euphoria following Manmohan Singh's first budget, seemed more than justified.

Till suddenly, the tap was plugged. In 1996, the growth rate dropped to 6.7 per cent and in the half-yearly estimates for 1997-98 it has dropped further to an abysmal 5 per cent.

There are many theories as to what went wrong. The recently retired governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Dr C. Rangarajan, took note of the phenomenon and said, "The deceleration in industrial growth has caused considerable concern. While undoubtedly over the medium-term infrastructure constraints can act as a break in growth, there is no reason to believe that supply constraints were more severe in 1996-97 than in 1995-96."

So, what was the problem? In early 1996, industry complained bitterly of a credit crunch and the initial slowdown was blamed on that. How could industry grow with no money available for investment? While the United Front finance minister P. Chidambaram in turn held the Manmohan Singh regime responsible for the credit squeeze, it was believed that as soon as liquidity returned to the market, things would be normal again.

That didn't happen. When RBI governor Rangarajan did inject a large amount of liquidity in the market by reducing cash reserve requirements of banks, he found that the demand for borrowing was extremely sluggish. Non-food banking credit showed a growth of just 10.9 per cent compared to 22.5 per cent the previous year.

This, despite the fact that most banks had reduced their prime lending rates.

Obviously, industry didn't *want* the money. It didn't know what to do with it. Inference: most expansion, modernisation and diversification plans were on hold once again.

Says Jairam Ramesh, ex-economic adviser to P. Chidambaram and now a Congress joint secretary: "Indian companies have been used to fat margins. Suddenly, faced with competition, they find their margins dropping. It's a rude shock."

Rangarajan puts it differently. The consumer durables sector, he says, "follow a cyclical pattern, with high growth followed by deceleration". This sector rose sharply for three consecutive years with an average growth rate of 21 per cent and Rangarajan believes that the slowdown in 1996-97 could in part be explained by that.

This is true. For instance, the consumer electronics market — television, audio systems and video recorders — together grew at a healthy 9 per cent between 1993-95. And then, suddenly, while colour TVs kept up the momentum (thanks to aggressive pricing strategies by companies like Akai), black-and-white TVs grew by a measly 1 per cent and sales of audio systems actually *fell* by 10 per cent. The auto industry has been much written about recently and need hardly be further explained. Suffice to say that the industry's over 25 per cent growth rate is now barely over 10 per cent.

But consumer durables were not the only ones to be hit. The fact remains that import duties were cut at a time when world prices for many products were already falling. This meant heightened competition from cheaper imports like steel, electronic items, intermediate petrochemical products, etc. The cheaper imports cut into profitability of indigenous manufacturers seriously and that is when alarm bells started ringing.

Says L.M. Thapar, chairman of Ballarpur Industries: "The recent import duty, cut even below the level permissible under WTO norms, has hit the industry. It is time government and industry had an indepth dialogue on the issue and evolve a strategy to have an effective negotiation with the WTO."

THE CONGRESS MANIFESTO

Industry

- Special support for small-scale industries
- Ensure support to Indian companies to help them compete effectively with foreign companies at home and abroad
- Use Tariff Commission as an institutional framework to help industry cope with transition to lower duties
- Strengthen anti-dumping machinery
- Delicence all industries except those in strategic and security-related areas
- Restrictions on domestic production in areas where imports are easier will be removed
- Implement the takeover code in a transparent manner. A new Companies Act and Foreign Exchange Management Act to come into force this year

Banking and Insurance

- Reduce transaction costs in banking so that interest rates for non blue-chip borrowers are lowered substantially
- Non-performing assets of banks to be brought down from 15 to 5 per cent by the end of the century. Debt recovery tribunals to be made more effective
- Mergers and consolidation in the banking industry will be encouraged
- Will open up the health insurance and pensions businesses to private sector. Joint ventures will be allowed with Indian companies holding the majority equity

Apart from imported paper being cheaper, Thapar's woes are compounded by the fact that he is in a traditional industry and one which is facing recession worldwide.

In fact, import duty cuts is one of the main reasons why industry is now turning to *swadeshi*. The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) has recently demanded a two year freeze on further reductions in import duty. Says FICCI secretary-general Dr Amit Mjtra: "Indian industry is not seeking support carte blanche. First, we need protection from falling tariff rates of imports."

But that is not where the demands for protection end. The ultimate targets are multinationals and foreign direct investment (FDI). Dr Mitra says: "In infrastructure, we don't mind a dominant role for MNCs. Even 100 per cent foreign investment is acceptable. In this area, foreigners should be given a leadership role. It is other areas that we should look at carefully. East Asia, for instance, does not allow more than 40 per cent foreign equity in its companies."

Dr Mitra also says that priority should be given to export-oriented MNCs: "In China, for instance, 57 per cent of its manufactured exports come from FDI. In India it's only 5 to 7 per cent."

He also voices a complaint being increasingly heard from industrial circles: "The Indian political economy will not allow closure of Indian companies in large numbers and replacement by foreign companies. There will be a huge reaction to that."

Former RBI governor C. Rangarajan: "The deceleration in industrial growth has caused considerable concern"

Pranab Mukherjee: "The Congress would not have been thrown out in the 1996 elections if its economic reforms were successful"

Multinationals gobbling up Indian industry — is that fear really justified? The most oft-quoted example, of course, is of Coke swallowing Thums Up (*see accompanying story*). But if we begin to look at bottomlines, the picture, as of now at least, is not bleak.

For instance, while the consumer electronics sector is seeing a great shakeout and a new MNC seems to be dropping in every other day, BPL has *increased* its market share to 29 per cent in the television sector. Videocon remains second at 26 per cent. Akai, Samsung, Sony, Sharp and Panasonic together account for 18 per cent of the market.

With its grand exchange offers and with free gifts with refrigerators and televisions, Akai has managed 5 per cent of the market, but is now beginning to feel the weight of being tied up with a discounted brand image.

Michigan-based Whirlpool's Indian division has estimated losses of Rs 200 crore and its US home appliances chief recently went on record saying they had overestimated the Indian demand for refrigerators and washing machines. *But* they are in India with a long-term view and will now act as an export base to other countries.

Despite their high-profile image, fact remains that almost no MNC in India is making money. Pepsi hasn't posted profits yet. Nestle's Maggi has increased volume sales five times but is still not a money-earner. None of the auto companies are raking in profits, while Maruti is still a name to reckon with.

While this may mean the deep-pockets theory about foreign companies is correct, it also means Indian industry has that much more time to gear up for competition in a mar-

P. Chidambaram: he held the Manmohan Singh regime responsible for the credit squeeze

ket no one else knows as well as them.

Also, much of what Dr Mitra is talking about — export-oriented FDI — already seems to be happening. Most MNCs overestimated the Indian market size and were caught unawares by the extreme cost-consciousness of the Indian consumer. Now, many are using Indian manufacturing facilities as an export base.

Notwithstanding the great MNC shakeout, it is in this area that the BJP really comes in. For the party, it is a question of mythos. Its style of politics works on symbolism: Ram was born in Ayodhya, Krishna was born in Mathura, drink Thums Up not Coke.

The BJP has promised to restrict MNCs in non-priority areas "and in areas where domestic industry is functioning well". This sound exciting to a lot of Indian industrialists.

The BJP has also said that, in these areas, existing MNCs can stay but no new ones will be allowed. Suddenly, it doesn't sound so exciting after all. Even the pro-*swadeshi* lobby is worried. As one of them said: "This will protect not only Indian industry but the existing MNCs as well. That will really drive us out of the market. As long as MNCs compete with each other, we have a much better chance."

In fact, the BJP's public pronouncements on economic policy and much of its manifesto is riddled with such contradictions. In a recent interview, prime ministerial candidate Atal Behari Vajpayee refused to answer questions on what he considers priority areas (apart from infrastructure) and it is increasingly becoming apparent that the party probably doesn't know.

The manifesto outlines the *swadeshi* philosophy: confidence that India shall be built by Indians.

India is still being built by Indians. FDI accounts for not more than 2 per cent of national investment and in no country does it go above 10 per cent. "But," says V. Raghuraman, secretary-general of the Associated Chambers of Commerce, "this 10 per cent is needed in critical areas — infrastructure, technology, to repay interests, etc. China has a 46 billion dollar trade surplus with the United States. Where does that come from?"

Self-sufficiency, says Jairam Ramesh, "is the ability to pay for our imports. How do you expect to pay for them without creating dollar earnings yourself?" The dollar earnings come from export (that often requires import component) and from inviting foreign exchange investment in the country. "Driving away forex earnings will only make you dependent on agencies like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) all over again. Is that what the BJP is heading for?"

Computer chips, not potato chips — is the party's evocative slogan. Says Raghuraman, "Do they know that the farmers of Punjab, who Pepsi once hired for its tomato paste business, have now exported Rs 300 crores worth of tomatoes?"

Economically, they couldn't have picked a more unfortunate concept. India is the largest producer of fruits and vegetables in the world. Forty per cent of this turns to manure because we have no cold storage, no reefer trucks, no trains. Example: horticultural produce last year was 100 million tonnes; we have cold storage facilities for only 8.7 million tonnes; so, what we didn't eat, we threw away.

India is also the third-largest producer of foodgrains in the world after the US and China — 200 million tonnes last year. At least 20 per cent of this — 40 million tonnes — goes waste due to lack of storage space and processing abilities. Reason: food processing is mistakenly assumed to be a low-technology, low-investment area reserved for the small scale industry. Fallout: low rates of return to the farmer who never manages to create a cash surplus.

A McKinzie study recently showed that the value-added foods sector in India is poised to grow to Rs 225,000 crore by the year 2005 — given enough investment and technological inputs.

The BJP is not worrying about figures for the time being. It is content to rake the *moolah* in. The industrial downturn apart, other things have also worked in its favour. Before Sonia Gandhi's decision to campaign, many industrialists saw the Congress disintegrating and pitched in with the BJP early in the game.

Others still are hedging their bets because of relationship problems. As a well-known industrialist said, "One doesn't know who to relate to in the Congress. Kesri is looking increasingly sidelined and Sonia is not the type to call industrialists to 10 Janpath and discuss economic policy. In the BJP you know who to go to."

So late last month, four of them got together — Nusli Wadia, Rahul Bajaj, Keshub Mahindra and Lalit Thapar — and called on both L.K. Advani and Vajpayee to press their demands. They are among the many who have been haunting Vajpayee's house in the recent past.

"We have to initially deny certain benefits to the consumers"

Jagdish Shettigar talks about swadeshi *and how it might affect industry, if the BJP comes to power*

As a key member of the BJP's economic think-tank, Jagdish Shettigar is involved in the articulation of the party's swadeshi *philosophy. Here, he explains the origins of* swadeshi, *the BJP's interpretation of it and gives a glimpse of what to expect from the party if it comes to power at the Centre.*

When Manmohan Singh announced his reforms package in 1991, the BJP claimed that the Congress had appropriated its economic agenda. Then, as reforms began to become popular, you felt the need to articulate an economic philosophy different from the Congress and came up with *swadeshi*. In that sense, wasn't *swadeshi* somewhat of a knee-jerk reaction?

Shettigar: Our policies are based on Deen Dayal Upadhyaya's philosophy of integral humanism.

Besides, when globalisation became the thrust of India's economic policy, it was not done out of conviction, but compulsion. Under pressure from the World Bank and the IMF. In 1980, Indira Gandhi slowly started dismantling some controls. In 1984, Rajiv Gandhi gave a big push to liberalisation. This was conviction. But I'm not prepared to say that the 1991 reforms were out of conviction.

Meanwhile, WTO negotiations started on the basis of the Dunkel proposals. This was the other kind of pressure from multilateral agencies on tariff structures, import of agricultural commodities, the Patents Act and financial sector reforms.

At that time, the RSS thought strong economic nationalism should be aroused. The Swadeshi Jagran Manch was formed in mid-1991. The work for subsequently articulated policies started then. Technically, the RSS has no hold over the BJP. But all of us come from that background and so the BJP decided to articulate the RSS stand.

There is a problem. The BJP — earlier Jan Sangh — was the first to make diplomatic and economic overtures to the United States. The Jan Sangh was bitterly critical of what it called Gandhi's 'retrograde attitude to technology'. To now espouse Gandhi's philosophy — isn't there a contradiction there?

There is no contradiction. I have read Gandhi's *Experiments With Truth*. He only says he is against technology or machines that take away jobs from people. That's what we are also saying. See, under colonial India, the fingers of local weavers were cut off to benefit British textile industry. Now, we believe more sophisticated methods are being used by the IMF and WTO to do the same thing — destroy India's manufacturing skills so that they can dump their goods here.

INDIRA GANDHI

"In 1980, Indira Gandhi slowly started dismantling some controls. In 1984, Rajiv Gandhi gave a big push to liberalisation. This was conviction"

RAJIV GANDHI

So what is your message to foreign investors?
We will follow a selective approach. We will welcome them in hi-tech and infrastructure industries. But in the consumer non-durables sector we would like to hold them off for the time being.

Look, there is no emotional attachment to this issue. We also recognise the consumers' right to maximum quality at a good price. But at a developing stage, a few sacrifices have to be made. We have to initially deny certain benefits to the consumers.

How exactly does India stand to lose from foreign investment in the consumer non-durables sector?
As per government reports, 53 per cent of foreign investment has actually come in the consumer goods area. What are MNCs guided by? The profit margin — which is highest in consumer goods. Today, the fact is that cost of production is very high in any segment — textile, steel, aluminium. Besides, we have obsolete technology. That means excess consumption of raw materials. The consumer will have to pay a much higher price apart from getting low-quality goods. We need state-of-the-art technology in these areas.

Even so, what harm do you perceive in potato chips? Certain chambers of commerce think you should view potato chips with respect to the farmer — that it might mean greater returns to him. Have you looked at it that way?
I know that there it's a question of priority. Of course, the full list will be completed after we come to power. We will encourage foreign investment only where technology is required.

So, do you consider the food processing sector — which desperately needs technology and investment — non essential? You know about the McKenzie...
Well, yes I know there is the McKenzie Report which said that Rs 23,000 crore worth of agricultural produce was wasted because of no processing facilities. Look, if the private sector is unable to bring technology to this sector and if we are not able to source from within, then we will think of globalisation.

"Under colonial India, the fingers of local weavers were cut off to benefit British textile industry. Now, more sophisticated methods are being used by the IMF and WTO to do the same thing"

Jairam Ramesh is not perturbed. "Why should they (industrialists) look for direction from us? Like good middle-class Indians, businessmen like order and stability. And like most educated Indians, they are also crypto-fascists. They are not happy with the face of Kesri. It's not a Brahminical face. They find it difficult to relate to him. Anyway, it's time they stopped genuflecting before politicians and went to the marketplace instead."

This is not likely to endear the Congress to industrialists very much either. Besides, the Congress holds the view that much of the attitudinal problem with globalisation is that people tend to look at it as MNCs invading India, instead of viewing it as an opportunity for Indian businessmen to go abroad. "Reliance has successfully raised close to 500 million dollars through its GDR issues. Ranbaxy has set up office in 36 countries. There are more curry restaurants in London alone than in Bombay and Delhi put together," says ASSOCHAM's Raghuraman. To tell MNCs to get out of India would mean asking Indian industries also to withdraw from the rest of the world.

Even so, the Congress has much to answer for. Pranab Mukherjee has gone on record saying the reforms were not a success. If they were, the Congress would not have been thrown out in the 1996 elections, he argues. While Pranab Mukherjee may have an axe to grind against his own colleagues, the fact is that in the five-year reform process, the Congress completely ignored agricultural reforms. And it paid the price.

It has earlier shrugged off responsibility saying agriculture is a state subject and therefore out of their control. But there were things that *were* central subjects that they could have dealt with, but didn't. Leading many people to believe, perhaps justifiably, that economic reform was

BJP Means Business

Why some leading industrialists are backing the saffron brigade

They have thrown in their hat with the BJP. Some are old admirers, most are recent converts. A look at their business health gives an insight into why *swadeshi* is suddenly looking attractive to these business houses.

Rahul Bajaj

• The Rs 3,454-crore Bajaj Auto group is facing its worst recession in nearly 40 years. For the first time in 1997, its six-monthly profits had actually fallen from the previous year.

Singhania is a supporter more than a support-seeker. He is a believer of the BJP's Hindutva cause and swadeshi is a natural fallout

Having ruled the two-wheeler segment for decades, Bajaj Auto has seen its market share falling from 48.6 per cent in 1994-95 to 44.5 per cent in 1996-97. And by June last year, it had come down to 37 per cent. It still dominates the three-wheeler market at 87 per cent, but faces impending competition from a recent tie-up between Greaves and Piaggio of Italy.

Bajaj's real problem is that he doesn't face a threat from outside, so much as a threat from within. The company still sells decades-old technology, refuses to upgrade its products despite being cash-rich (reserves of Rs 1,500 crore), and despite its obvious strength, will not look at the export market.

The group had taken to resting on its laurels, and it still refuses to get up and go. In an era of technology-consciousness, competition from better products could mean doom for the company.

Vijaypat Singhania

• To be fair to him, he is a supporter more than a support-seeker. He is a believer of the BJP's Hindutva cause and *swadeshi* is probably just a natural fallout.

But Singhania could do with some help. Chairman of the Rs 1,680 Raymond group, he has faced some bad times recently. The Rs 675-crore textiles division saw net profits drop by an amazing 87 per cent to Rs 12.68 crore. A two-month strike at his Chhindwara plant had much to do with it. In June last year, his denim plant in Maharashtra suffered a blow when Singhania's partner reneged on a 75 per cent buy-back deal.

His other businesses are not doing so well either. His cement and speciality steel divisions are still uncertainly poised and minor diversions — condoms and cosmetics — don't add much to the bottomline.

Though Singhania's textiles division is still extremely

The Mahindra group no longer faces succession problems as Keshub Mahindra is all set to hand over charge to Anand Mahindra

Rahul Bajaj: he doesn't face a threat from outside so much as a threat from inside

competitive and enjoys a good brand image, the group is rethinking strategy. It may do better after it hives off its non-core competent areas. For the present, it has scaled down projected turnover from Rs 5,000 crore to Rs 3,000 crore.

K.K. Modi

• The Modi group does not even figure in the top family businesses of the country anymore. In 1992, the Gujar Mal Modi group split with two major factions — K.N. Modi got Modi Cement, Modi Alkalies and Modi Champion; K.K. Modi got the better-known Godfrey Phillips, Modi Rubber and Modi Xerox. There were other offshoots like S.K. Modi who eventually launched his jinxed ModiLuft Airlines.

The 1992 split was messy and self-defeating. The group that once rated amongst India's top business houses, has now disintegrated so badly that it has been edged out by the likes of relative newcomers

Though Modi Xerox and Modi Rubber continue to do well, it is more than obvious that the group needs to be rejuvenated. Since he took over as president of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) K.K. Modi has made his views plain: that Indian industry has been given a raw deal by the reforms process. He hopes the BJP may be able to set that right.

The Mahindras

• Apparently, this was a mistake. They landed on the *swadeshi* bandwagon before they knew Sonia Gandhi would be helping to revive the Congress. Mahindra & Mahindra, M&M for short, is perhaps one the few business groups on the wrong side of reforms, despite the fact that it is doing well. The Rs 3,607-crore company is financially robust and has a healthy respect for joint ventures — having tied up with Ford, British Telecom, Singapore Network Service and McCann Ericksson (for its advertising agency). It has also set up an overseas subsidiary called M&M USA which did sales of over one million dollars in 1996-97.

There is only one problem. Theorists on core-competence believe that no company can become a global player if it strays too far from its speciality. In this case, light commercial vehicles and light utility vehicles (jeeps and tractors) Time will tell. Its other main advantage is that the group no longer faces succession problems with Anand Mahindra set to take over from Keshub Mahindra in a smooth transition.

Growth in real GDP (Gross Domestic Product)

1991-92	0.8%
1992-93	5.1%
1993-94	6.0%
1994-95	7.2%
1995-96	7.1%
1996-97	6.0%

Fiscal Deficit (as percentage of GDP)

1991-92	5.9%
1992-93	5.7%
1993-94	7.4%
1994-95	6.1%
1995-96	5.5%
1996-97	5%

Inflation (measured by Wholesale Price Index)

1991-92	13.6%
1992-93	7.0%
1993-94	10.8%
1994-95	10.4%
1995-96	5.0%
1996-97	5.8%

essentially an urban phenomenon. It was not clear whether the party has yet learnt its lessons.

Unfortunately, the BJP's brand of *swadeshi* doesn't deal with this crucial sector either. Even where they have taken a position it is not clear they'll stick by it. Forced to the wall, the party claims it will — know the figures... prepare the lists... make up its mind... sort the details out... etc, after it comes to power.

No one knows what that means. Despite its official position, the party is already straining under its own contradictions. The 13-day BJP government's decision to clear counter-guarantees for the Enron project has angered and embarrassed the BJP cadre earlier (story is Jaswant Singh as finance minister helped the deal go through).

The pro-reformers believe that while a BJP government may grant a few favours here and there, it will not change broad policy programmes. The pro-BJP group believes the party will bring honesty to economic policy. But the debate right now is at the level of rhetoric, and rhetoric buries a lot of crucial issues under it. The real issues will come later.

Presumably, even the BJP realises that while slogans can help run a political party, governance is another thing altogether. •

Sarita Rani/New Delhi

COCA-COLA AND MAHATMA GANDHI

The Atlanta-based soft drinks giant is looking for an 'Indian' image

How to succeed in the brand developing business? Simple. Associate yourself with images the nation identifies with most and success will follow In the annals of big business, there may never have been such a curious combination — Coca-Cola and Mahatma Gandhi. A bit of India mixed with the American soil, as a six-feet-four-inches high bronze statue of the apostle of peace was installed at the Martin Luther King Centre in Atlanta, Georgia, and 24 January was declared as Mahatma Gandhi Day in the state.

The event helped the world's largest beverage company to be closely identified with a nation where it enjoys a 65 per cent market share, especially in the light of recent threats by Samata Party leader George Fernandes that he will continue his tirade against Coca-Cola and other multinationals if the right-wing BJP is voted to power in Parliament.

Coca-Cola India distributed 800 cans of Thums Up and Limca among the guests invited to the occasion. This move had a subtle message for Coke's adversaries who had been claiming that the mandarins in Atlanta were not keen on marketing the Indian brands acquired from Parle in the much-publicised, US$ 40 million deal in 1993.

Donald Wilson Short, CEO and president of Coca-Cola India, said in an exclusive interview: "The idea is to Indianise our operations so that there is an element of trust. Even though both Mahatma

Donald W. Short: "The idea is to Indianise our operations so that there is an element of trust"

While Thums Up has always been India's leading carbonated soft drink, Limca is the number one brand in the cloudy-lemon segment. And thanks to some effective campaigns and market strategies, the brands have grown admirably. While Thums Up has grown over 50 per cent over the last three years, Limca has grown over 20 per cent during the corresponding period

Gandhi and Dr Martin Luther King were separated by two continents and a generation, they believed in the existence of a law higher than that of the state. And it was on this belief that both preached non-violence and equality for mankind."

This is just the beginning of Coke's *swadeshi yatra*: the company is negotiating with distributors across the US, Canada, Singapore, London and the Middle East to market three Indian brands — Thums Up, Limca and Maaza — this summer. "The idea is not to make Coke an Indian brand. The idea is to develop Indian brands across the world," said Short.

Market analysts say that with involvement in events such as these and the forthcoming Rural India Games in Punjab, the next three-nation cricket bonanza in India and the Sharjah Cup, Coca-Cola's image is undergoing a tremendous change in the Indian market that is estimated at a whopping Rs 2,000 crore and growing at an encouraging pace of 16 per cent per annum.

The beverage giant had an instant 65 per cent market share following its acquisition of the Parle brands and the much-hyped launch of Coke in 1993. But in spite of that, the going hadn't been easy. Now things are changing.

In the last seven months, Coca-Cola's perception of the Indian market has changed completely. The I-am-the-king hype is gone and the beverage giant is forging ties for a greater reach across the length and breadth of India where the market is considered the second-largest in the world. And in tune with government guidelines, Coca-Cola India has already floated four new subsidiary bottling companies across the country, ostensibly to gear up for another hectic cola war against arch-rival Pepsi and newcomer Cadbury-Schweppes in the coming summer.

"Many companies misunderstood the real potential of the market. Let me tell you there is a huge market for soft drinks here. In Japan, there are nearly 125 million consumers and we sell in excess of 700 million cases. In the Indian market, we are currently selling over a 100 million cases, but that is in no way close to the true market potential. In the case of soft drinks, the opportunities within a narrowly-defined consumer base are still limitless."

And in the process of understanding the market, Short and his men have understood the nation's pulse. For example, in Bombay, Coca-Cola offered a festive invitation price of Rs 7 for 300 ml bottles last year. The move helped sales mount from 1,800 cases to 3,100 cases (one case containing 24 bottles) a day.

"We have chosen in India to step back in time a bit to the three A's — availablity, affordability and acceptability — because the fundamentals of the business have not been met here. We are only available in 500,000 outlets while many other fast-moving consumer brands are available in three to five million outlets. And now you will find that most of our bottlers know that we are working along with them. We just had a very successful meeting in Sun City where we discussed our marketing as well as our operations strategy for 1998," says Short.

Insiders say that Coca-Cola is already working on a package by which it can — at least by 2000 AD — sell Coke, Fanta and its other products like Thums Up, Limca and Maaza at an affordable price for the Indian market. In addition — realising that distribution is still low priority for soft drinks companies in India — Coke plans to increase its outlets across the length and breadth of the country. "Our goal is to have a five-rupee price point on soft drinks. Besides, our outlets will definitely increase to 600,000 in 1998," says Short.

While Thums Up has always been India's leading carbonated soft drink, Limca is the number one brand in the cloudy-lemon segment. And thanks to some effective campaigns and market strategies, the brands have grown admirably. While Thums Up has grown over 50 per cent over the last three years, Limca has grown over 20 per cent during the corresponding period. And thanks to the new bottling plants and acquisition of Parle's mammoth 54-plant bottling network, Coca-Cola has been able to register a phenomenal growth in volume. In 1996, the soft drinks giant's volumes in terms of gallon sales grew by 21 per cent over 1995, while unit case sales grew by 23 per cent over 1995.

To strengthen operations in perceived areas of weakness, Short recruited Sanjiv Gupta from Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Limited as the company's marketing head. "Although the penetration level will not change immediately," says Short, "just wait and see the way we unfold our plans for India." •

Shantanu Guha Ray/New Delhi

A long way from home

Shahid Siddiqui, editor and politician, is taking no short cuts

The year was 1989. Rajiv Gandhi had been displaced from the prime ministership and the Congress was full of murmured criticism of the man who had led the party to a staggering victory just five years ago and had so quickly lost it all. Overnight there were critics of Rajiv foreign policy, his domestic policy, his weakness for signing accords, his position on the Muslims, his political inexperience...

It was on the so-called Muslims question that Congress members were most disapproving. And indeed to a bystander, the party position seemed indefensible.

How could the party talk of protecting the interests of Muslims when it was a Congress home minister who had given the permission for the *shilanyas* of the Ram temple in Ayodhya? How could the Congress pretend to speak for the Muslims when it had clearly tried to play politics with their interests in the Shah Bano case?

The Congress was full of anger at its electoral defeat. And though there was no one who asked questions about accountability, Rajiv Gandhi now had fewer friends.

Oddly enough, there was one young man whom Gandhi's government had put in jail, who came out in his support. In an atmosphere where it was foolhardy for a Congressman to even mention the M word, Shahid Siddiqui, journalist, till lately a communist, and once a bitter critic of the Gandhi family, spoke up in favour of the Congress and Rajiv Gandhi. He paid the price for this, and there are many who say that he was proved wrong. But Siddiqui's association with the Congress just spells out the conviction that there is no other party which can protect secularism.

When he took over his father's Urdu newspaper, *Nai Duniya*, business was quite good. Siddiqui made it boom. In those days, the paper took a fashionably anti-Congress line, in keeping with Siddiqui's own conviction — he was a Left-wing sympathiser, a supporter of the CPI(M)'s student wing, the Students Federation of India.

But when the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation began in the early Eighties, Siddiqui began to see politics a little differently. His father had gone to jail during the freedom movement and the Emergency. Siddiqui belonged to a political family. He backed the conservative Muslims — the Babri Masjid Action Committee.

At that time, this kind of activism was not very popular: among the Muslims, Arif Mohammad Khan's position on the Shah Bano case had created ripples. And Arun Nehru, who was minister of state for internal security, had his beady eyes fixed on those he could 'fix' for being anti-Congress.

At about this time, Siddiqui met the prophet of the Sikh cause, Jagjit Singh Chauhan, and interviewed him. The interview was, he says, unexceptionable. Chauhan criticised the Indian government for mishandling the Sikh issue, but also said that the creation of Khalistan was not politically practical.

However, the Government of India took a dim view of this. Siddiqui's home and press were raided and he was thrown into jail under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act.

This was Siddiqui's bleakest hour. Meanwhile, Arif Mohammad Khan 'helped' an employee of his to stage a rebellion in *Nai Duniya*. The employee's name was Mohammad Afzal. He later became a politician in the Janata Dal.

By now, Arif Mohammad Khan and Arun Nehru had left the Congress and joined V.P. Singh's Jan Morcha. Siddiqui petitioned the court against his imprisonment and was released. Now he was free to reassess his political options. He chose to go with Rajiv Gandhi.

The man who had fought Gandhi tooth and nail when the latter was out of power now began to come close to him. Gandhi told him that the country needed young men like him and that he would be sent to the Rajya Sabha. Then Gandhi was assassinated. And Siddiqui again found himself on the crossroads.

When P.V. Narasimha Rao came to power, Muslims found they had to make a choice. And when the Babri Masjid fell, they found they had no choice. Still Siddiquistuck on in the Congress at a time when it was impossible to go out and say that you were a Congressman and a Muslim.

Siddiqui had now become a full-fledged Congressman. He became a member of the Pradesh Congress Committee and other bodies. He also became convener of the Congress minority cell. In the course of his politics, he met and became friendly with Tariq Anwar, an associate of Sitaram Kesri. When the United Front government fell, Siddiqui got a Congress nomination from Muzaffarnagar. It helped that the Congress did a deal with Ajit Singh's party: this meant that in western UP where Muzaffarnagar is, the Jats would not work against him.

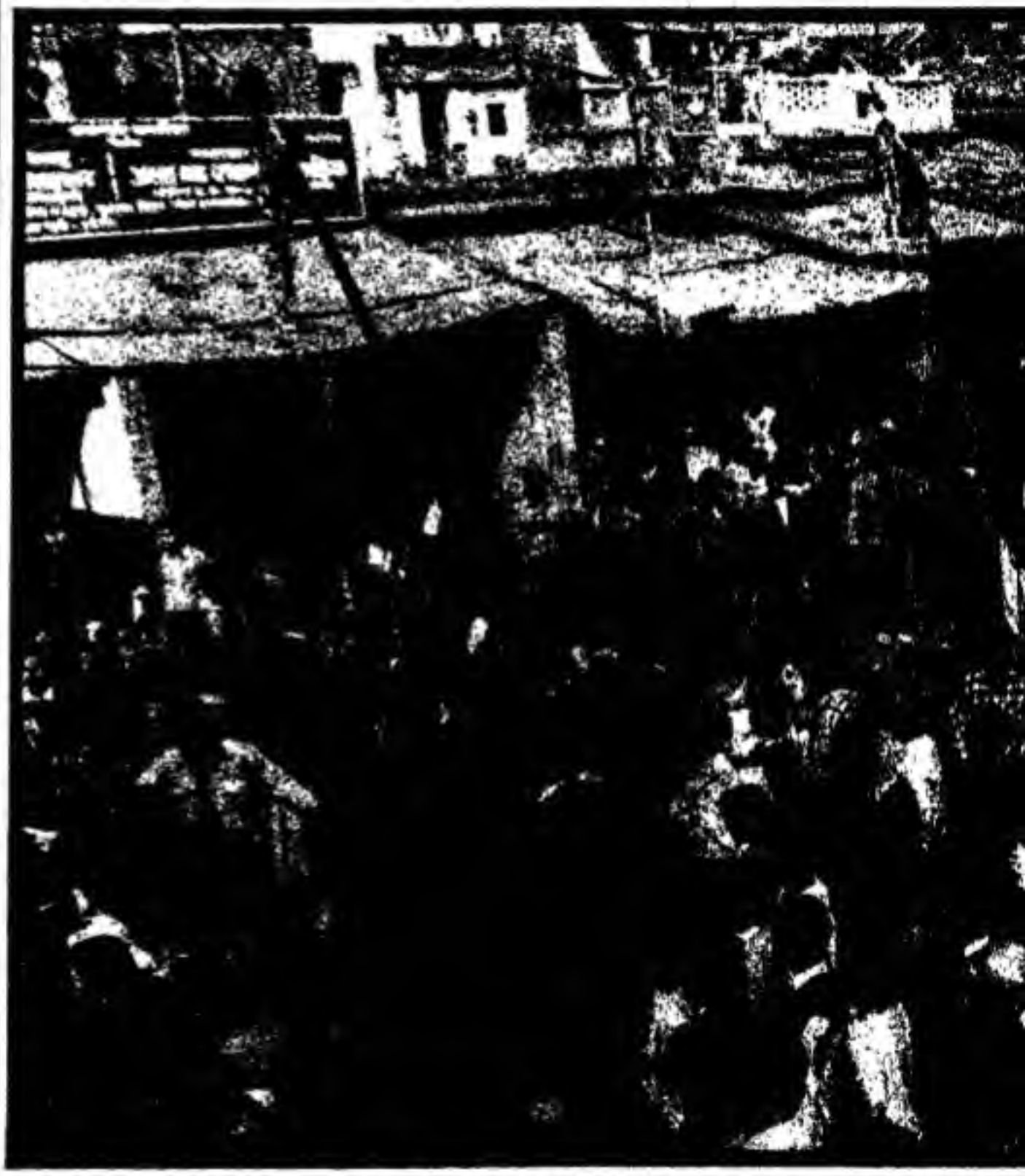
Whether Siddiqui wins the election or not, he believes that the Muslims should support the Congress because the Congress has no option but to stay secular. Mulayam Singh Yadav or Kanshi Ram could have been an alternative. But the egoes of both the leaders are Muslims.

In a sense, Siddiqui is the symbol of traditional Muslim politics. There's money here, there's business but there is also a burning desire to change things. And he admits that in this game there are no short cuts.

Shahid Siddiqui is walking the extremely long road home. •

Terms of

Muslims in Uttar Pradesh begin to accept the BJP's 'moderate face'



Muslims have been treated as a major vote-bank by all political parties in India. And in Uttar Pradesh, where caste, creed and religion have traditionally played major roles in the making and unmaking of governments, Muslim voters have been targeted by all political parties other than the Bharatiya Janata Party, whose radical views kept them at arms length.

Now, in a desperate bid to come to power at the Centre, the BJP, too, has fallen in line with all other parties to bait the Muslims. So, if Sonia Gandhi is busy tendering an apology for the demolition of the Babri Masjid, Ghulam Nabi Azad promising jobs to Muslims during his recent visit to the Aligarh Muslim University and Mulayam Singh Yadav repeatedly assuring them of protection from communal forces, the BJP is not far behind in promising the moon to the minorities.

Not only the BJP's prime ministerial nominee, Atal Behari Vajpayee, regarded as the party's "saner and moderate face", but even hardliners like Uttar Pradesh chief minister Kalyan Singh are out to emphasise that the party is "not anti-Muslim".

Vajpayee, after filing his nomination from Lucknow, said, "I appeal to Muslims to give us a chance and see how we work." Singh went a step further by claiming to have resolved the decades-old dispute between the Shias and Sunnis over a religious procession. "Successive governments never even attempted a solution, while claiming to champion the cause of the minorities," he said, "and we who have been labelled as anti-Muslim have eventually achieved the impossible."

The dispute, having its roots in Islamic history, caused violent clashes between the two sects, claiming at least 250 lives since 1905, when the first major Shia-Sunni riot broke out in Lucknow. Trouble arose largely due to the insistence of the Shias on reciting *tabbarra* (derogatory remarks against Sunni saints) during their Azadaari processions.

After much debate, the Janata Party government in 1977 tried to find a way out by allowing both the sects to take out their respective processions (Azadaari by Shias and Madde-Sahaba by Sunnis). The measure only resulted in a bloody riot that took the highest toll of 52. The government was left with no choice but to ban the processions.

Subsequently, every government paid lip-service in the name of finding a solution which only heightened tensions between the two sects, particularly during Muharram and Ramzan. Matters worsened during Mayawati's chief ministership, when three Shia youths resorted to self-immolation for lifting the ban.

Kalyan Singh, who had promised to work out a settlement, kept his word by not only lifting the 21-year-old ban but by also ensuring a smooth and peaceful conduct of the two processions.

So excited is the BJP over this achievement, that even Vajpayee views it not only as a feather in his party's cap, but also as a major step towards striking a chord with the Muslims, who have traditionally been averse to the BJP because of its 'Hindutva' line.

And it seems to have inspired him to find a "negotiated settlement to the Ayodhya issue as well". "When we could resolve the long pending and sensitive Shia-Sunni dispute through dialogue, I am sure we should also be able to ensure

endearment

A smooth and peaceful conduct of religious processions by Shias and Sunnis after 21 years has helped the BJP strike a chord with Muslims, who are traditionally averse to the party because of its Hindutva line

a permanent solution to the Ayodhya dispute as well in the same manner," he said in Lucknow.

Sure enough, the BJP leadership has already begun to see signs of a softening Muslim attitude towards the party which is visible largely among younger Muslims in the state, where the community forms 15-20 per cent of the electorate.

Even though the drift may not be substantial, there is enough evidence that a beginning has been made, and is bound to go a long way in cutting ice with the larger section of the community in years to come. While some of the Shias have not been as averse to the BJP as the Sunnis, the lifting of the ban on their Azadaari march has further endeared the sect towards the party.

Back in Lucknow's walled city, Haseeb Ansari, a young sewing machine dealer, did not hesitate to admit, "I may not be in favour of the BJP because of what they did in Ayodhya, but surely I have nothing against them anymore; because if they were to be blamed, then the Congress too must share the blame equally."

He also remarked, "Contrary to what we expected, there is no particular discrimination against us under the Kalyan Singh regime." For Anwar, a 25-year-old rickshaw-puller, "If there is discrimination amongst Hindus on the basis of caste, then there is bound to be some discrimination against Muslims too, but you cannot blame the BJP for it; this has continued under all governments."

Significantly, some Muslims also seem no longer impressed by Mulayam's diatribe against the BJP. "By repeatedly calling the BJP communal, effort is being made to terrorise us, but enough is enough. We can see the political game behind it, especially when we don't have any trouble on account of a BJP government in UP," remarked Parvez Abedin, general manager of a Kanpur tannery. Raifq, an electrician, feels that political parties have only been using Muslims as a vote-bank and do not mean any good for the community.

In the temple town of Ayodhya, where local Muslims have been victims

Leaving the party behind

It's not the BJP but Vajpayee versus the rest

The BJP strategy of projecting Vajpayee as Prime Minister seems to be paying dividends. In certain parts of UP, where the BJP may not be the favoured party, it is Vajpayee's name that gels with the masses. And even where some voters have a grouse against the party, they seem to be still inclined to vote it to power essentially because they are keen to see Vajpayee as the next head of the Indian government.

It is the large turnout at his election rallies that has boosted Vajpayee's morale. He launched the campaign from Gorakhpur, the nerve centre of politics in eastern UP, with over a lakh of people attending. And the meeting he addressed in Kanpur was packed to capacity also.

A 2-km-long procession followed Vajpayee's motorcade on the day he filed his nomination at Lucknow. Scenes at Allahabad, Varanasi and Bareilly were no different. "We are seeing such massive gatherings at election meetings after many years," said witnesses.

In Allahabad, the home town of the Nehru family, an old Congressman who has recently switched over to the BJP commented, "Such a large gathering had not been witnessed here after the days of Indira Gandhi." In contrast, people are not pleased with former BJP president Murli Manohar Joshi, who is the party's candidate from this prestigious seat. "It is easier to get access to the former Prime Minister than to have an audience with this local MP," remarked a BJP activist, referring to Joshi's "feudal mannerisms and high-caste Hindu mentality".

With Vajpayee's security having been stepped up in view of reports of enhanced risk to his life, entry to the venues of all election rallies is now restricted. But despite the narrow gate allowing only single-file entry through metal detectors, the sprawling 2.5-acre field of the Maharana Pratap College in Gorakhpur was [illegible]ming with people.

[illegible]iously, the alleged don turned minister in the Kalyan Singh Cabinet, Hari Shankar Tiwari of the breakaway group, Loktantrik Congress, had a hand in collecting crowds. Some of the gathering can also be attributed to Fateh Bahadur Singh, another member of Singh's Cabinet and son of the late chief minister, Veer Bahadur Singh, who put Gorakhpur on the political map for the first time.

However, it was a hero's welcome for Vajpayee wherever he went. And the common greeting was, "*Raj tilak ki karo taiyyari; aa rahen hain Atal Behari* (Get ready for the coronation; here comes Atal Behari)." Both men and women turned out in large numbers. "They come not to see me but to listen to me," said a confident Vajpayee. And many of them seemed to have come on their own.

So overwhelmed was Vajpayee's main opponent, film-maker Muzaffar Ali of the Samajwadi Party, by the gala procession following him when he went to file his nomination, that he come over where Vajpayee was addressing the crowds. Admitted Muzaffar, "I had a mind to even go up to the dais but by then the show was over."

Muzaffar Ali: overawed by Vajpayee's presence?

Vajpayee working the crowd: "They come not to see me but to listen to me"

Significantly, Vajpayee, who is usually silent on Sonia, attacked her directly this time: "Sonia is making a mockery of herself by throwing the gauntlet at others over the Bofors controversy, as if she does not know who got the kickbacks in the infamous deal."

In Gorakhpur and Lucknow, Vajpayee also demanded publication of the SIT report on Bofors. He alleged that the Gujral government was not releasing the report "because the UF wants to keep its doors open for some kind of an alliance with the Congress in the post-election scenario". "Let the BJP government be formed. We will not only make all these documents public but will also punish all those involved in the Bofors scandal," he warned.

Sensing the mood of the people, who obviously wanted to know more about him, Vajpayee went out of his way to talk about himself. The emphasis remained on his role as an MP for 40 years. "Even though I always remained in the Opposition except for a brief stint, I sincerely served the nation," he pointed out. "I have seen all Prime Ministers of the country right from Nehruji to Gujral, and in all these years I have kept my record unblemished and straight, ev[illegible]

ryone has seen my behaviour and is aware of my character," he asserted.

Yet, it was apparent that he was not quite comfortable about the Sonia factor. So far, none of the Opposition leaders could match his charisma. Sonia's plunge into the campaign has now given him some competition.

That perhaps was the reason why he devoted so much of his speeches to himself. He did not hesitate to enumerate the development works, down to the number of Sulabh Shauchalayas added to Lucknow out of his Rs 1 crore local area development fund.

Significantly, even his worst critics and political foes have no serious charges against him. Mulayam Singh Yadav meekly described him as the "BJP's only trump card".

On Ayodhya, Vajpayee declared, "I would prefer to thrash out a solution to it through a dialogue and I am confident of doing it." When asked what he would do if that failed, he said, "Well, then we may consider bringing about a legislation."

If tenure is the yardstick for success, Vajpayee surely leaves everyone behind. But the question is whether his larger-than-life profile that even surpasses the party will help sustain such massive turnouts into votes for the BJP.

of the communal fury on 6 December, 1992, when the Babri Masjid was pulled down during the last BJP regime, they appear to be as chagrined with the BJP as they are with others including the Samajwadi Party, that otherwise claims exclusive hold over the community.

The oldest litigant in the Babri case, Mohammad Hashim, who would once swear by Mulayam, flayed the SP leader for "paying lip-service". Mulayam, who had conveniently forgotten his assurance for getting compensation for the losses suffered by local Muslims in December 1992, donated generously to a Jain temple during one of his visits instead.

Maulana Kalbe Jawaad, the young firebrand Shia leader who was responsible for taking the demand for lifting the ban on processions on a high pitch, told SUNDAY, "We are happy that the Kalyan Singh government has kept its word."

According to Tooraj Zaidi, a young Shia businessman who has decided to "serve the party (BJP)" along with a large number of Shia youths, "We are not interested in the past. We must look ahead and with Atal Behari Vajpayee as Prime Minister I am sure Muslims in India will get a fairer deal than they have ever received in the past."

Dismissing criticisms by the SP and the Congress of the BJP as a communa party, he asks, "Are they not aware of th second-grade treatment meted out to th Shias in Pakistan, which claims to be a Islamic country," adding, "I am sur Shias are safer in India than in Pakistan where several Shia mosques have bee pulled down or damaged."

Even those who see a "political ploy behind the move "to woo Muslim votes admit, "The Kalyan Singh governmen has surprised us all by lifting the ban. Says Naseem Alam, a shopkeeper in th Aminabad market. "There can be n denying that the BJP has not been as ba as we were given to believe. By allow ing both Sunnis and Shias to take out ou respective processions they have shown that other governments too could hav done it if they were truly sincere to ou

"We who have been labelled as anti-Muslim have eventually achieved the impossible," says BJP hardliner Kalyan Singh who claims to have resolved the decades-old Shia-Sunni dispute

cause, and we would not have bee deprived of our legitimate right for tw decades."

Much of the apparent change in th Muslim attitude can be attributed to th projection of Vajpayee as the prospe tive Prime Minister. As Shamim, watch-repairer, quipped, "I do n approve of the BJP as a party, but with man like Atalji at the helm of affairs, am sure the party will also improve i ways." •

Sharat Pradhan/Lucknow, Gorakhpur and Kanpur

STAR WARS

Bollywood is getting ready to serve *kabab-e-Khubsurat* and *Judwaa biryani*. Sounds cryptic? But the stars of the tinsel town are set to open a cham of theme restaurants around the country.

Shah Rukh Khan, Manisha Koirala, Jackie Shroff, Gulshan Grover, Ajay Devgan and Kajol have got together to launch Stars in Business, a company which will run a theme restaurant called Movie Magic. Not to be outdone, the Wizcraft Entertainment, with G.S. Entertainment in tow, has unveiled plans for its own international chain of theme restaurants named India Talkies, roping in Sanjay Dutt, Salman Khan, Govinda, Karisma Kapoor and Mahima.

Both sides claim their project is the real thing. "You'll soon be eating at one of our restaurants," gushes Gulshan Grover. But promoters of India Talkies are quick to retort. "Do they have a logo or a signature tune? We've everything lined up", informs Sabbas Joseph of Wizcraft.

But neither side is in a mood to back out. The race for Palate Bollywood has just begun.

Kajol: what's cooking?

Salman Khan: adding spice to life

TWO OF A KIND

No sibling rivalry here. One of India's best-known photographers, Ram Rahman, and his painter-dancer sister Sukanya held a joint debut exhibition in New York recently and the critics in the US wowed.

Ram, who has studied at MIT and Yale, is now actively associated with SAHMAT, curating their exhibitions *Hum Sab Ayodhya* and *Gift for India*. He has held exhibitions in India and England and for the first time, his works have been displayed in the US.

Ram and Sukanya have been deeply influenced by their parents — Indrani, a classical Indian dancer in the 60s and a contemporary of Yamini Krishnamurthy, and Habib, a pioneer in modern architecture.

Sukanya is now busy with *Dancing in the family* — a memoirs of her mother Indrani and grandmother Ragini Devi.

Ram and Sukanya: all in the family

STAR STRUCK

She walked in wearing dark glasses and everyone thought she was a college girl. But the minute the troops got to know they had Manisha Koirala in their midst, there was a mad rush for autographs.

Last week in Delhi, the 6th battalion of the 5th Gurkha Rifles celebrated 50 years of their raising and invited a galaxy of film stars to the jubilee dinner. Among the stars were Sunil Dutt and Manisha Koirala. As

MAESTRO'S MIND

The rock legends of the 60s considered Pandit Ravi Shankar the music world equivalent of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. But to the sitar maestro, the rockers were "a shrieking, shouting, smoking, drug-crazed" bunch of loonies. Colourful comments!

In his forthcoming autobiography *Raga Mala*, Ravi Shankar is not even remotely generous to the Beatles. Ghost-written by Oliver Craske, the book has been ironically edited and introduced by George Harrison, his long- time friend and producer of his recent album, *Chants of India*. "I was not attracted by their voices since they mostly sang in a high falsetto pitch" said Shankar, "I also had trouble understanding the words".

Pandit Ravi Shankar: pop shock

Though Harrison described him as "a guru and a father figure", Shankar wasn't happy with the Beatle's attempt to integrate Indian sounds with Western music in *Norwegian Wood*. "When I heard the song", recalls the sitarist, "I thought it was a strange sound that had been produced on his (Harrison's) sitar!"

The maestro, whose fan following included Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix, seems to be unhappy with the way Indian culture had been distorted by the flower-power generation.

many of the troops — all Nepalese — keep pictures of Manisha (herself a Nepalese) in their wallets, they were naturally thrilled to meet the star.

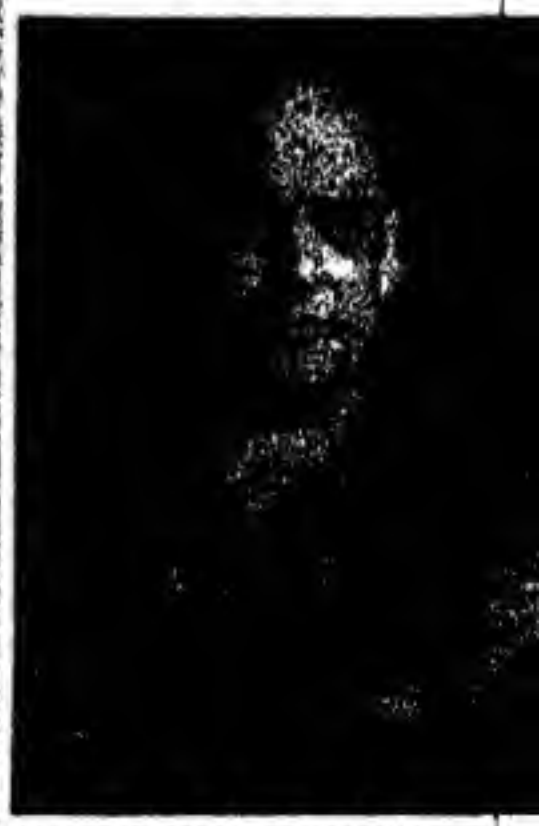
The jazz band beamed as it belted out song after song from *1942 — A Love Story* played in her honour. Suddenly the damp and cold of the February evening vanished. Koirala smiled prettily, chatted for a while and left. For the rest of the evening, the *jawans* and their families were walking around with stars in their eyes.

Manisha Koirala: dream sequence

CALL OF THE VALLEY

He's well-known for taking the initiative: But this time, Mahesh Bhatt may have overreached himself. Bhatt has decided to shoot his next film in violence-torn Kashmir, a state which has been out of bounds for filmmakers for nearly 15 years.

The recent massacre of Pandits in the state and sundry episodes of violence have only reinforced Bhatt's resolve to bring Kashmir back into India's consciousness. "How long can we live in fear of our own people? It's time we made a new beginning," Bhatt says. Farooq Abdullah has promised to make things easy for him.



Mahesh Bhatt: celluloid integration

The film is tentatively titled *Zakham (The Wound)*. Bhatt will have to ensure nobody gets any *zakham* while shooting.

Street craft

They beautify homes but do not have a roof over their heads

They paint, sculpt and make models out of clay. Their creations adorn the walls of homes, government buildings and hotels. They earn in thousands. But most of it goes in paying representatives of the law-enforcing agencies, the administration and the anti-social elements. They live on the sidewalks of Hyderabad.

"We make your homes shine with paintings, idols and miniature paintings made-to-order. But our lives continue to remain bleak," complains Prabani Ratna. Born into a family of painters and idol-makers, she has been at the job for the last 20 years. All she uses are flimsy raw materials — plaster of Paris, wood and straw. Created and marketed on the pavements, the demands for these decorative items are steadily increasing.

It all began when Kumari and Ilaya sects of *banjaras* (gypsies) who specialise in art and crafts took to the streets about five decades back. The days of the rich patron were over. "At the government-sponsored handicraft emporia we were given paltry salaries. Even in private units we were made to overwork without any benefits. It was then we thought of hitting the roads," says Kumari Ananda Naik, headman of a group operating on the sidewalks of Indira Park.

There are around 2500 of them spread all over the country, wandering through the big cities -- Hyderabad, Madras, Pune, Bangalore, Calcutta. "We were not allowed to function in places like Bombay and Delhi by the police and municipal authorities. In some places like Lucknow, Bhopal and Bhubaneswar we ran into trouble with anti-social elements."

They appear to be living in penury, as each family saves its earnings and sends it back home to its people, mostly living in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. "Initially, we begin our enterprise with only a few products and then invest the profits to produce more," informs Illaya Govind Naik of Amberpet. His group recently produced artifacts worth Rs 27 lakh for a handicrafts emporium in Hyderabad. "We earn almost Rs 10 to 15 lakh a year but never show it off."

Business takes a beating during rain and winter months. That's when they return to their homeland, trying to make a living from the remains of the little agricultural land they still hold. But it's better to be back in the city, discriminatory behaviour from government agencies notwithstanding. "Lepakshi and other emporia buy our product and sell them. But they pay us hardly 50 per cent of the rates they pay the manufacturers from arts colleges," says Narayana Ghorpade, who leads a group of 25 families living in Uppal.

Kumari Naik insists that the cost of raw materials like plaster of Paris, paints, oils and white cement had shot up by over 300 per cent, "but the emporia want us to accept prices fixed in 1991". The purchase officers of the government emporia, however, claim that the cost of production is much lower, almost 25 per cent, of the price quoted by the tribals. Besides, "they want risk allowances for carrying on their livelihood on the pavements, which is impossible to meet," says Prabhakar Joshi of UP handicrafts emporium in Hyderabad.

Put together, the handiworks of these artisans have a turnover of about Rs 5 crore a year. And Rs 2 crore worth of their produce travel abroad

While elders somehow manage to put up with the difficulties, it is the young ones who suffer most. Living in tents without proper sanitary conditions results in health problems. Access to education is something of a distant dream.

A move was made to provide permanent homes for them in Banswada, Kondapally (near Vijayawada) and Punganur (in Chittoor district) during the tenure of former chief minister N.T. Rama Rao. Such schemes exist even now, but the artisans feel that they were being hijacked by the Backwards and the Dalits.

Put together, the handiworks of these artisans make a turnover of about Rs 5 crore a year. And Rs 2 crore worth of their produce travel abroad. But all that has little impact on their financial and social status. They remain where they are, temporarily stationed on the sidewalks of big cities — maybe a stone's throw from the imposing Charminar and the sprawling Victoria Memorial also crafted by nameless artisans who never quite got their due. •

The homeless craftsmen with their ware in Hyderabad: soft target of anti-socials

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

Clean chit?

The Assam Governor's refusal to sanction Prafulla Mahanta's prosecution in the LoC scam evokes a mixed response

In a landmark decision, on 5 February, Assam Governor Lt-Gen. (retd) S.K. Sinha rejected the CBI request for his sanction to prosecute chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta in the Demow case of the LoC scandal. The CBI investigations had not yielded prima facie evidence to establish the criminal culpability of the chief minister, the Governor said. However, he sanctioned the prosecution of former veterinary minister Nakul Das in the case on the basis of the evidence against him.

Sinha said he had discussions with legal experts and also shown "informally" the evidence provided by the CBI to Justice J.S. Verma, the former Chief Justice of India and Justice H.R. Khanna, former judge of the Supreme Court.

The Governor said he had also sought the advice of the attorney-general of India, Ashok Desai. "He was reluctant to discuss the facts of the case with me because at a later stage he could be called upon to advise the government in the case."

Desai, however, discussed in general terms the responsibilities of a sanctioning authority in a criminal case. He held that it was not only the right but also the obligation of the sanctioning authority to satisfy itself that prima facie evidence existed to proceed with prosecution. In case prima face evidence was not available, sanction for prosecution should be withheld.

Sinha said that on 1 February he had requested new CBI director D.R. Karthikeyan to meet him while he was in Delhi. The CBI director said that he was not associated with the investigation and had no knowledge about it. While appreciating his position, the Governor made it clear that if no further evidence was provided to alter his line of thinking, he would have to take a decision on the basis of the existing evidence.

The Governor said the CBI had investigated four allegations against Mahanta before submitting its report to him:

Governor S.K. Sinha said that the CBI investigations had not yielded prima facie evidence to establish the criminal culpability of chief minister Prafulla Mahanta

- That Rs 40 lakh was paid to Mahanta by Rajendra Prasad Borah during the 1991 Assembly elections.

- That Borah also purchased air tickets for Mahanta, then leader of the Opposition, to travel from Guwahati to Delhi and back.

- That Borah purchased 2,000 bundles of CI sheets and distributed them in Mahanta's Nagaon constituency.

- That Mahanta ordered Borah to prepare bank drafts for Rs 26 lakh and distributed the sum among various institutions in Nagaon.

On the first allegation, the Governor said that the CBI had no evidence except Borah's statement. He had asked the CBI whether Mahanta had acquired assets disproportionate to his income. The agency replied that it was not under the purview of the investigation. This argument was untenable as the assets of other accused, such as Dilip Saikia Sonowal, B.P. Telenga and Nakul Das, had been examined.

Regarding the purchase of air tickets,

"There's no alternative for the people"

ULFA leader Mithinga Daimary explains the election boycott stand

Mithinga Daimary, the central publicity secretary of the United Liberation Front of Asom, recently met two journalists from Guwahati. Excerpts from his first interview after taking over his current assignment.

SUNDAY: Does ULFA believe in democratic processes like elections?

Mithinga Daimary: Here, the fundamental question is why we do not believe in democracy. The struggle launched by ULFA since 1979 was to bring back the justified democratic rights of the people of Assam from which they have been deprived by the Indian state for the last 50 years.

The so-called intellectuals who have sold their souls to the government have termed ULFA's boycott call for elections as a body blow to democracy but the reality has demonstrated that the meaning of Indian democracy is injustice, exploitation and deprivation. We are opposed to the 'exploiters' democracy' and we believe in the 'exploited's democracy'.

Q: What is your opinion on the stand that the people should take during the coming elections?

A: The boycott call given by our party against the fake democratic elections including the forthcoming one is a unanimous decision.

Q: In the 1996 elections, your party had chosen to remain silent. What made you take a boycott decision this time?

A: In the 1996 elections, the people had taken part conditionally, expecting an unequivocal assurance from parliamentary political parties. In fact, at different places, contesting candidates were compelled to put their signatures on 'promissory notes'.

The ruling AGP-led alliance swept to power on the basis of the assurances demanded by the people. The AGP had promised to give the right of self-determination to the people in their election manifesto and also promised to remove the army and withdraw the black laws from Assam.

This was an important event in the political history of Assam because never before had the people participated in an election conditionally. In other words, the people had lost confidence in the parliamentary system

A voters' queue during the 1996 elections: promises broken

"In the 1996 elections the people had taken part conditionally, expecting an unequivocal assurance from parliamentary parties...Parliamentary democracy failed to pass the test"

over the years and yet they wanted to give a last chance to this system.

However, the parliamentary democracy failed to pass the test and that is why this line of thought calling for boycott of elections has become inevitable. There is obviously no alternative for the people.

Q: Your call for boycott of elections has not been approved by several citizens, intellectuals and organisations. Will this not harm your party?

A: Those respected intellectuals who have the power of analysing the situation from the angle of reality have not opposed the inevitability of the revolutionary struggle of Assam. And the boycott is part of that timely decision and step.

On the other hand, all those who have sold their souls to the Indian state can naturally say that "the army personnel who have stayed away from their families for a long time are bound to commit rape during the operations". Who will believe these intellectuals who have no capacity to think on their own?

Q: A lot of people say that ULFA tried to gather support by invoking fear of the gun.

A: Is it untrue that for the last 50 years the Indian state has exploited and deprived the people of Assam? Even after this, would the majority people of Assam remain as dumb as cattle? Moreover, the relationship between the masses and a revolutionary organisation is like that of fish and water. There is no place for invoking the fear of the gun.

Q: Many respected citizens and intellectuals say that your organisation has no mass base.

A: Who says so? Let them come to our base and see for themselves how we are surviving.

Q: Has the offensive by the Indian Army sent the ULFA into disarray?

A: We are determined to carry on the struggle until we reach our goal. As long as the masses are with us, Indian Army cannot send us into disarray. •

Interviewed by Dilip Chandan

the Governor pointed out that there was no evidence indicating Mahanta was aware that the tickets were bought by Borah. Moreover, it was not uncommon for travel expenses of political leaders to be borne by others.

Though there was evidence of Bora purchasing 2,000 bundles of CI sheets and sending those to Nagaon, no evidence of their distribution could be found. There were conflicting statements on the issue.

While Rs 13 lakh had been distributed in the constituency of Sonowal and Rs 4 21 lakh in the constituency of Telenga, different figures came up at different times regarding the amount distributed in Mahanta's constituency. There was also no evidence of Mahanta being aware that the money was fraudulently acquired by Borah. The Governor pointed out that normally documentary evidence is avoided in the distribution of black money and in this case the money was distributed to institutions and not to individuals. There was no evidence of Mahanta misappropriating any of the drafts for himself.

Besides the four major allegations, the CBI also alleged that Mahanta had entered into a criminal conspiracy to defraud the state to the tune of Rs 48.1 crore. But no evidence of such conspiracy could be traced, said the Governor. On 22 December, 1996, Borah himself told the CBI that Mahanta did not know him well enough.

Expectedly, the Governor's decision evoked mixed response from political parties in the state.

Expressing his "shock", state BJP secretary Jayanta Dutta said that while Borah had been repeatedly claiming that he paid money to Mahanta and the CBI was also emphatic that it had sufficient proof to establish Mahanta's involvement in the scam, "why the Governor has opted for such a stand on the issue makes one wonder".

"The decision of the Governor set at rest all the confusion over the issue. The Governor's decision will help the four-party ruling alliance in the state in the coming Lok Sabha elections," said Nandeswar Talukdar of the CPI(M). However, he hastened to add, "The CPI(M) is for punishing the embezzlers of public fund."

Bhrigu Kumar Phukan, once Mahanta's comrade-in-arms and now rebel AGP leader, called the Governor's decision a "biased" one. "It seems that the Governor is out to protect a corrupt person. Moreover, his silence over the allegation made by several MPs that he is behaving in a biased manner is also mysterious," he remarked.

The ruling Asom Gana Parishad obviously had reasons to be delighted. For, while Mahanta has got a respite, former Assam Pradesh Congress Committee president Nakul Das is going to face prosecution. This, according to minister and party spokesman Digen Bora, "has exposed the Congress' diabolic design to shield its leaders by pointing the accusing finger at Mahanta".

Prafulla Mahanta: winning this round

The Congress, on the other hand, expressed its disgust. "Never in the history of the country's premier investigating agency had such a thing happened. The Governor, by rejecting the CBI's charges and that too on the eve of the elections tried to help Mahanta and his party," said Sylvius Condopan, leader of the Congress legislature party in the Assembly.

Condopan, however, hoped that "the Governor's action would in no way affect the party's poll prospects and the people have by now seen through the game". •

Dilip Chandan/Guwahati

The Buying and S

The Sukhoi aircraft that is not ready to fight — yet

SUKHOI-30

PUSHPINDER SINGH CHOPRA

In June 1997, defence minister Mulayam Singh Yadav got his first and only visit abroad to Moscow, postponed. He insisted on meeting Russian President Boris Yeltsin, protocol or no protocol. Yeltsin *had* to meet him. After all, he was indebted to India for the Sukhoi deal. The new date fixed for the visit was October 1997.

The SUNDAY report on the Sukhoi robbery is the first expose of an aircraft that never was. No government anywhere has ever committed such enormous resources — unless it is joint research and development — for a weapons system which another country will develop, test and prove for you. The reason: India had to bail out the fledgling Russian aviation industry and a troubled Yeltsin. This was the bottomline for all arguments in favour of the Sukhoi deal forwarded in Moscow in February 1997. Familiar line? It should be. It reminds you of India's benevolence in rescuing the Swedish government and the Bofors arms industry under similar circumstances.

The timing and circumstances of the deal merit highlighting: the nearly Rs 7,000-crore Sukhoi deal, six times the size of Bofors, was clinched in April 1996, days before elections in India and Russia. Rupees 800 crore was paid as advance. For 12 years, three successive air chiefs had gone hoarse shouting for the Advanced Jet Trainer (AJT) carrying a price tag one-third less than that of the Sukhoi. But the government, with the curious consent of the Indian Air Force (IAF), bowled a googly. On 30 November 1996, the United Front government, instead of investigating the contract, went ahead honouring it — paying another Rs 1,500 crore for the first eight aircraft.

These are the two-seater (non-operational) trainer version, the Su-27 PU, which the Russians have redesignated the Su-30. This is a far cry (at least, 10 years away) from the multi-role version the IAF has ordered: Su-30 MKI.

The Su-30 is truly a 'weapon of peace' as described by the chief of air staff (COAS), Air Chief Marshal S.K. Sareen, as in its present state it is not combat-capable. Yadav pleaded with the Russians for more such aircraft, obviously so that more money could be paid for them and more spin-offs would result.

After initially complaining about kickbacks from the deal for the government, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) fell in line — some say in overall national interest because the Sukhoi was described as the panacea for the country's Purulias and the ultimate frontline aircraft.

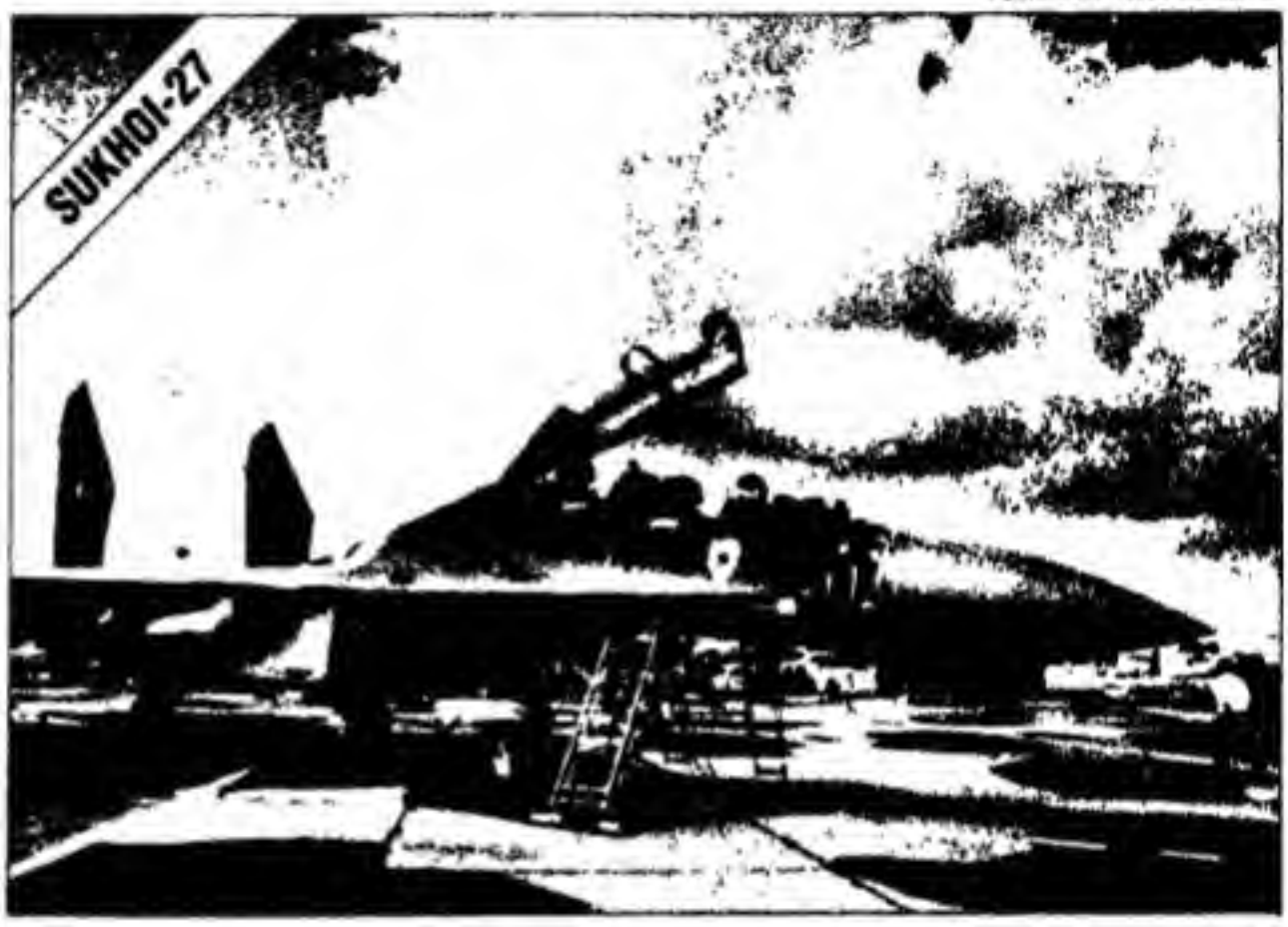
The great plane robbery, while acknowledging the greatness of the aircraft questions its utility and induction in the prevalent and future national security framework and the enormous money involved with inevitable kickbacks. Fifteen months after the deal was signed and 12 months after the arrival of the Sukhois in Antonov freighter planes, SUNDAY has nailed the biggest lie in India's armaments history.

The government's rebuttal (*see box*) of the SUNDAY investigating report is an insult to the intelligence of the knowledgeable public.

The issue is not the ability of the Su-27 to perform, but the manner in which the contract was drawn up, the

elling of Lemons

PUSHPINDER SINGH CHOPRA



The report on the Sukhoi robbery is the first expose of an aircraft that never was. No government anywhere has ever committed such enormous resources for a weapons system which another country will develop, test and prove for you

creation of a requirement when none existed, the haste with which money was advanced to Russia eight months before the contract was signed, and worst of all the arrogance with which the defence minister states that the contract "safeguards against the involvement of middlemen or the payment of commissions to anyone".

The key (and only) issue is: was the Sukhoi—Su-30 MKI—(and its capability) required by the IAF or was the critical Air Staff Requirement (ASR) crafted around the Russians' specification after the decision was taken to buy the aircraft?

Officers posted in Air Headquarters during 1994-95 say that none of the operational directorates (Air Defence, Offensive Operations, Electronic Warfare) was at any time involved, let alone

Air Chief Marshal S.K. Sareen: In a hot seat

consulted, during the so-called evaluation of the Sukhoi. In any case, the Su-30 MKI could not be evaluated — it will not exist till at least 1999 when the first prototype will be ready to fly!

The publication of the report in SUNDAY (*The Great Plane Robbery* and *The Yogis and the Commissars*, issue date 1—7 February, 1998), elicited several responses from the government. The Indian Air Force issued a note, decrying the reports. The ministry of defence (MoD) held a three-hour meeting on 6 February, to discuss how the report should be tackled. The meeting resulted in a note (*see box*).

The note has raised five main issues.

1. The Su-30s were inducted to meet present and projected require-

FOR THE RECORD

There are no kickbacks involved in the Su-30 deal, says the Indian government

The Government has reaffirmed that the recently acquired Su-30 aircraft from Russia meets the specific requirements of the Indian Air Force (IAF), including its ability to carry a strong payload to distances beyond the range of existing aircraft in the IAF inventory. The contract for the acquisition of the Su-30 aircraft was signed in November, 1996, during the visit of a delegation led by the then defence secretary to Moscow. These aircraft were inducted to meet the present and the projected requirements of the IAF based on a rational threat assessment, optimal utilisation of financial resources and by following to the letter all norms and procedures associated with defence procurements.

Denying some ill-informed allegations in a recent issue of a weekly magazine, it said that the Su-30 aircraft not only came from a proven family of aircraft with advanced contemporary features but were also highly competitive in terms of cost comparisons with similar aircraft of different origins. Contrary to false impressions sought to be created, the first batch of aircraft already with the IAF, some of which gave a scintillating display on the Republic Day, have come fully equipped with hard points capable of carrying a lethal array of weaponry.

The contract for the acquisition of the Su-30 aircraft for the IAF incorporates safeguards against the involvement of middlemen or the payment of commissions to anyone. The defence minister Shri Mulayam Singh Yadav has clarified several times, including in Parliament, that in the event of any payment of commission is proved, the contract will be scrapped and the money recovered.

Apart from the framework of the security environment, the specific requirements of the service concerned and the cost-effectiveness of the selected system, the issue of reliability of the source country is also an important consideration in the acquisition of defence assets. The relationship of friendship and trust between India and Russia is a traditional one and was reaffirmed during a visit of Shri Mulayam Singh Yadav to Moscow in October 1997, his first visit abroad as defence minister. No contract was signed during the visit. •

Mulayam Singh Yadav : In the eye of the storm

ments of the IAF, based on rational threat assessment, optimal utilisation of financial resources and by following to the letter, all norms and procedures of defence procurement.

The facts: How can the requirements of the IAF be met when the aircraft, as configured to IAF's ASR is still to be developed and will only be available some years from now? When the CAS had clearly stated in December 1993 that the Su-27 family had no relevance in the future plans of the IAF, what geopolitical event occurred within the next few weeks to change the threat assessment? Is the MoD endorsing that a complex and futuristic weapons system ASR can be produced within a span of six months? If the IAF had followed its laid-down procedures, such a feat would have been impossible.

The IAF is on record that the Mirage-2000 adequately meets its multi-role requirements and has been pressing to augment this fleet and acquire mid-flight refuelling to enhance its capability. A large capital investment made in India to set up repair and overhaul facilities for a mere two squadron force will now remain under-utilised. Therefore, purely on this rational and commercial judgement, additional Mirage-2000s would have been a more cost-effective solution. But the government's evaluation team rejected this in preference to the Sukhoi!

2. The Su-27s not only come from a proven family of aircraft but are also highly competitive in terms of cost comparisons with similar aircraft of different origins.

The facts: If you require the multi-role Su-30, you do not evaluate the Su-27. It is like deciding to buy a Maruti Zen on the basis of a trial run on a Maruti 800.

It needs to be emphasised that the Life Cycle Costs (LCC) could amount to anything from 20 to 30 times its procurement costs. Often spares are highly priced to cover up for low initial costs. It is for this reason that defence procurement the world over is now done on the basis of LCC comparisons. The MoD and the IAF are fully aware that initial procurement costs of erstwhile Soviet aircraft are lower than their Western counterparts. However, the Russian philosophy of usage — manpower intensive, older technology, non-modular concepts, high-fuel consumption, low engine overhaul — all add up to a significant enhancement of overall LCC costs of the system.

It is for these reasons that the IAF now insists potential vendors submit LCC along with their commercial proposals. But how can LCC details be provided for an aircraft yet to developed? So the question of cost comparisons is a red herring.

3. The aircraft are equipped with hard points capable of carrying a lethal array of weaponry.

The facts: The Sukhoi-27/Su-30 is a weapon system, not merely a flying machine, as it is today. The point is that the eight aircraft in India since March 1997 do not have the weapons to fit on the hard points. The combat aircraft has to be integrated with the selected weapons and avionics. The avionics suite was only selected in late 1997 under the chairmanship of Sareen and the range of weapons are still under consideration. (The weapons options are likely to include the Kh-59M and Kh-31 ASMs and R-77 AAMs).

There is no doubt the air frame structures will have the necessary hard points. The additional question is whether other common Soviet weapons already in the IAF's inventory are inter-usable. And, how can this be operationally exploited when the current standard is not the IAF's standard even in terms of two-crew work sharing.

The fact is the eight Su-27 in Pune are *not* combat capable and are at present fit only for "scintillating displays on Republic Day parade".

PUSHPINDER SINGH CHOPRA

Officers and airmen in front of a Su-30

India had to bail out the fledgling Russian aviation industry and a troubled Boris Yeltsin. This was the bottomline for all arguments in favour of the Sukhoi deal forwarded in Moscow in February 1997

Yeltsin: what transpired in Moscow?

4. The issue of reliability of the source country is also an important consideration in the acquisition of defence assets.

The facts: At a joint IAF-CII seminar held in Novemebr 1994, the then COAS, S.K. Kaul, had made a strong plea to the industry for help in providing spares to the IAF fleet as Soviet supplies had dried up. This was the first public admission of the dangerous operational impact this erratic support had on the IAF. Between 1992 and 1994, nearly half the MiG-29 engines were held up either en route or at Russian overhaul factories, adversely affecting operational readiness. These were all premature withdrawals. Doubts and concerns about Soviet spare part support comes equally strongly from the army and navy which too are hostage to and victims of Russian product support. For the government to declare Russia reliable source is a travesty of the truth.

The *Aviation Week and Space Technology* magazine dated 26 January, 1998, has confirmed the infirmity of Russian export controls and their total unreliability.

The vital question not addressed by the government is: why was the option of partial license manufacture — after outright purchase of eight aircraft, trying to manufacture the rest in India — dropped in preference to purchase of 40 aircraft and then consider technology transfer? This goes against the government's strong advocacy of self-reliance.

George Tanham, vice-president of Rand Corporation and defence and security expert, in 1993 wrote a monograph on the IAF's missing strategic air doctrine ! Two years later, the IAF wrote one and put it under wraps. Tanham was in India last week and told SUNDAY: "I cannot understand why you bought the Su-30. I would have taken the AJT."

The induction of the Sukhoi-27/30 is so murky that it merits digging. This should be the new government's first priority. •

Maj. Gen. Ashok K. Mehta and SUNDAY's Investigative team

Southern BEAM

Can Prasar Bharati CEO S.S. Gill revive Doordarshan's ailing centres in the south?

The appointment of Surinder Singh Gill as Prasar Bharati CEO seems to be the best thing that could have happened to southern Doordarshan *kendras*. For some years now, these Doordarshan centres were being swamped by regional satellite moghuls like the Sun TV in Tamil Nadu, Eenadu in Andhra Pradesh and Asianet in Kerala. The earlier dispensation at Mandi House had virtually stymied the growth of the southern *kendras*.

Unbelievable though it may seem, some serials shown by the southern *kendras* had to have the chief minister's recommendation. Those sitting in Delhi habitually barked out orders to Doordarshan station directors on who should be given prime time slots. So producers in the south bypassed the regional directors and flew down to Delhi from where they returned not only with approvals but also with prime-time slots for their serials.

In this scenario, most regional directors who were nearing retirement chose to dance to the tune of the Mandi House mafia who, through political connections, were able to secure extensions for their favourite yes-men heading these stations.

Recently, the controversial Trivandrum Doordarshan director, V.G. Mathew, had boasted that he would get a one-year extension after his retirement on 31 January. Mathew, who had a powerful godfather at Mandi House, used all his influence in his attempt to wangle an extension. But his efforts

"Doordarshan should set a benchmark of excellence"

S.S. Gill talks about his priorities

Surinder Singh Gill (71), CEO of the newly-constituted Prasar Bharati Corporation, has created quite a flutter in his bid to improve the goings-on at Doordarshan (DD). In the process, he has stepped on several toes. Gill, who has overseen some of DD's finest programmes like Nukkad, Hum Log *and* Buniyad *when he was I&B secretary, spoke to* SUNDAY. *Excerpts from the interview:*

SUNDAY: What are your priorities for the southern regional channels of Doordarshan which have been neglected so far by the bosses at Mandi House?

Surinder Singh Gill: There will be a total revamp in the working of the southern channels and we will give them all support in their battle against the regional satellites. Each state should be considered a separate entity and regional *kendras* should be strengthened.

Feature films on Doordarshan will be totally replaced by good quality telefilms and other first-rate clean entertainment. No violence and crime. There will be no lechery and programmes that show women being ill-treated.

Q: But then, satellite channels in south are full of such crass entertainment and Doordarshan stands to lose money. Please comment.

A: I regret to say that Doordarshan has gone completely off the rails with too much emphasis on earning commercial revenue. Our basic duty is to perform our essential public mandate. We will not copy the fare dished out by the satellites. Instead Doordarshan should set a benchmark of excellence in the programme.

Q: What kind of programmes are you talking about?

A: I am willing to pay upto Rs 3 lakhs per episode for good quality telefilms in regional languages to be made by established movie professionals and also by young filmmakers with a purpose. I have already contacted top names in the film industry to make good programmes which would be synchronous with the socio-cultural

NITIN RAI

came to naught when Gill learnt about it. In fact, Mathew refused to retire and hand over charge for two days. He also tried to influence Gill through political leaders. Said an angry Gill: "I am not going to be pressurised by anyone and I won't tolerate any nonsense. That man has not been given an extension. If earlier extensions had been granted, I am not responsible for them. In future, extension may be given to somebody who is competent and honest."

Under pressure from powerful producers and marketing agencies, Mandi House was dubbing Hindi serials like *Om Namo Shivaya* and others into southern languages. On his recent trip to Madras, Gill met private producers and decided to stop it

As far as the southern *kendras* are concerned, the 'Mathew affair' has brightened the images of both Prasar Bharati and Gill, though a section of senior officers at Mandi House believes that Gill will have to go after the elections.

Meanwhile, at Mandi House, where cynicism runs deep, any attempt to over-

RUPINDER SHARMA

S.S. Gill: not succumbing to pressure

ideology of Doordarshan.

Q: What about the dubbed serials which played havoc with local serials?

A: Good question. I have already taken a decision to discontinue dubbed serials in southern *kendras*. I agree with you that most of these dubbed serials are third rate. Instead of dubbed serials, we will give more time to regional language teleserials.

Q: Are you planning to give more time to regional channels to show programmes in their language as there is a complaint that Delhi is poaching on their time?

A: Shortly, we will be giving the 9.30-10.30 pm chunk, which is prime time, to the regional *kendras* to show their programmes.

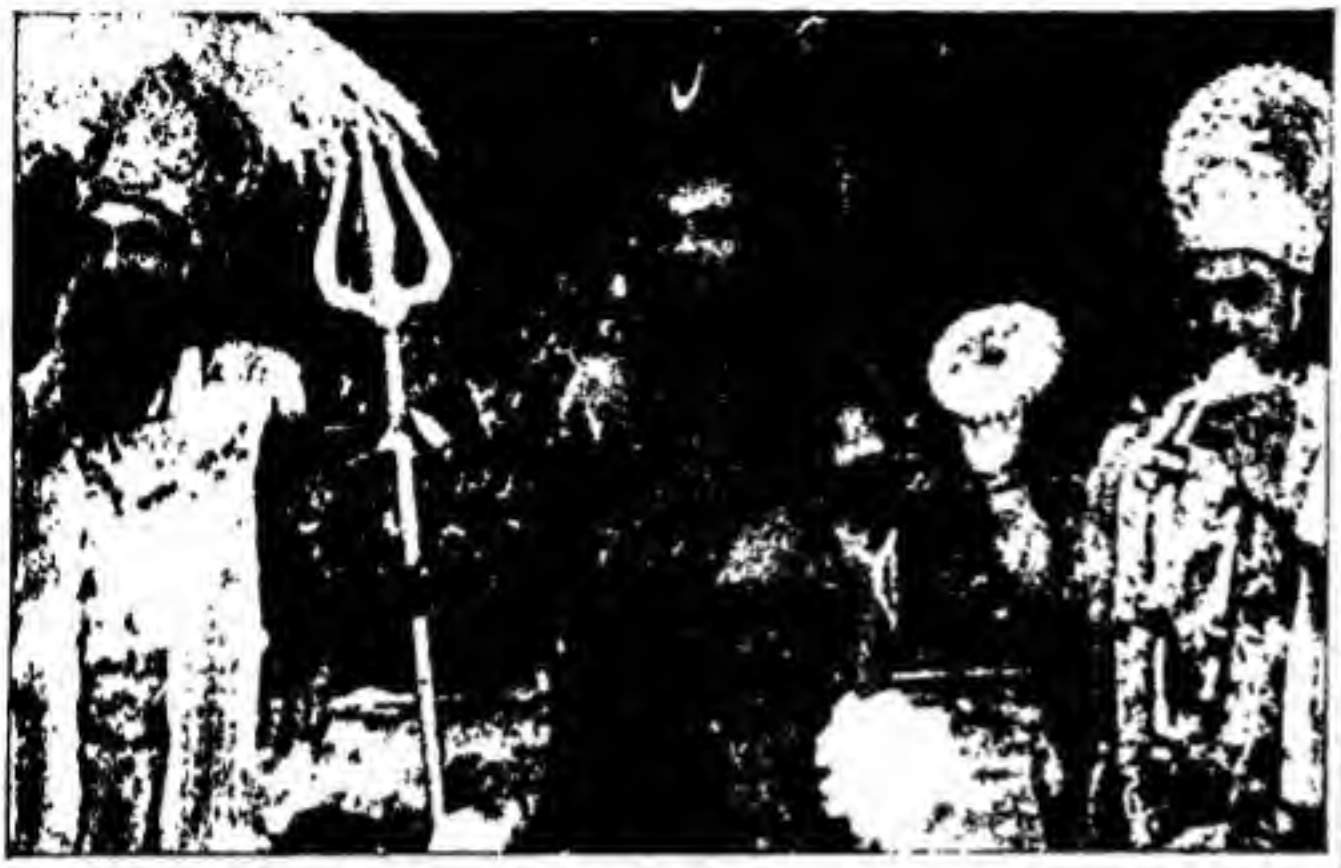
Q: Already, the regional satellite channels are full of election coverage while the regional *kendras* of Doordarshan have yet to start their election coverage. Please comment.

A: As a measure to create public awareness, Doordarshan has, since 26 January, been telecasting "quickies" on the need to exercise franchise and elect "clean candidates". But definitely election coverage will be the first big test for me. A 72-hour special election bulletin, including a series of discussions with all the political leaders on burning issues will be telecast on 2 March. The commentary in Hindi would be superimposed by regional languages. I think Doordarshan news today has not only improved but is totally unbiased. For the first time, "post-election" proceedings would also get extensive coverage including the political games which are going on and who would be the next Prime Minister.

Q: But will the viewers accept the changes you are planning to implement?

A: Our duty is to try and cultivate good taste. It is disheartening that films like *Padosi*, *Baiju Bawara* and *Tansen*, which were blockbusters at one point of time, have no audience today. Even the ads shown are lewd.

But we have to try our best to induce people to watch programmes that are clean and entertaining and not clones of *Santa Barbara* which show men running behind others' wives, a



Still from *Om Nama Shivaya*: comic relief

haul the system is likely to be resisted. Said a senior official at Madras Doordarshan: "All this talk of change is a lot of hot air. Galvanising unionised staff won't be easy. Doordarshan has always been run by the PMO and the I&B minister through handpicked officials. Has Gill been able to reshuffle any senior bureaucrat at Mandi House?"

But then, Gill appears to mean business. Within hours of arriving in Madras, he met private producers and marketing men. He promptly agreed to one of their basic demands — to stop the dubbing of Hindi serials like *Om Nama Shivaya* and others into Tamil, Malayalam and Telugu.

In Bangalore, even the private Kannada satellite channel, Udaya, has been prevented by the government from beaming dubbed serials. For Tamil Nadu and, especially, Madras, once the centre of a fierce anti-Hindi agitation in the Sixties, the fast-increasing popularity of Bollywood soap exports through Doordarshan has provoked a lively debate, with opinions ranging from the prosaic to the acerbic.

Senior Tamil theatre and TV artiste Poornam Viswanathan argues that the dubbed versions merely fill an entertainment need. "They certainly cannot replace native Tamil serials. Neither the stories nor the atmosphere portrayed reflect the classic Tamil milieu," he feels.

The dislike for the dubbed versions is shared by the noted writer Sivasankari. "People now talk in *Junoon*-Tamil. The dubbing is atrocious and the language used is extremely abrupt and ungrammatical." For many viewers, *Om Nama Shivaya* turns out to be a comic affair with dialogues completely out of sync with lip movments.

To others like Rajaganapathy, a professor of Tamil, the issue transcends the concern for language and technical finesse "From the costumes to the lifestyles portrayed, it appears to be the question of an entire ethos that is sought to be subtly imposed on us," points out Rajaganapathy.

The dubbing of Hindi serials into Tamil has been the outcome of the pressure exerted on Mandi House by powerful Hindi serial producers and their marketing agencies.

Says Ramamurthy, owner of Vision Time, a leading marketing agency in south, "The price of original Tamil serials has crashed due to the influx of dubbed serials. For example a serial costing Rs 1.75 lakh per episode is now available in the market for just Rs 1.25 lakh and, even then, there are no takers." The reason, according to Ramamurthy, is that in the case of dubbed serials, MNC advertisers like Hindusthan Lever are able to buy commercial time at a cheaper rate.

Kalanidhi Maran: clever programming

As a result, Ramamurthy, who used to sell a ten-second spot for Rs 18,000, has no takers for original Tamil serials, while producers of dubbed serials in Bombay are offering the same commercial time on a package deal. Today, the Madras Doordarshan's ten-second spot for a reputed serial is hovering around Rs 13,000. But most clients pefer Sun TV which sells the same spot for Rs 12,000 for prime-time slots. Added Ramamurthy: "If Gill is able to stop dubbed serials in southern Doordarshan, he will not only revive the market but also enhance the quality of the serials."

Meanwhile, the Prasar Bharati CEO has initiated impressive changes in the southern *kendras*. Gill has asked all station directors to improve their staid news bulletins. Sun TV, and more so its dynamic CEO Kalanidhi Maran, has broken Madras Doordarshan's monopoly over news with clever programming and a sound business strategy.

Recent surveys show that Sun TV news is watched more in Madras city compared to Doordarshan's news in Tamil. Visual clippings in Sun TV news touches nearly 70 per cent compared to Doordarshan's less than 50 per cent. Though being a pro-DMK channel, Sun TV offers a bit of everything for everyone and avoids propaganda.

But Gill hopes to succeed in making Doordarshan popular. "On the technical front, we would be adding equipment worth Rs 171 crore to phase out old and unserviceable equipment. Once we digitise our news, we will be way ahead of the rivals," he predicts.

If Gill and his men at Mandi House get their act together and beef up the quality of in-house programming, satellite channels in the south (which have strong political affiliation) may be out of business. But in order to make that happen, the southern *kendras*, which have been the traditional money spinners for Mandi House, will have to be unshackled from the stranglehold of the bureaucrats in Delhi. •

Sreedhar Pillai/Madras

A fine blend

Fusion art reaches a new high with painter S.G. Vasudevan's experiments

Poet,scholar,folklorist,translator — A.K. Ramanujan was many things to many people. But to artist S.G. Vasudev, he was also a dear friend from whom there was a lot to learn. They shared a symbiotic admiration of each other's works through the three decades of friendship that they shared. Ramanujan bought some of Vasudev's paintings. Vasudev designed the jackets for some of Ramanujan's books.

Vasudev felt Ramanujan's poems lend themselves to visual representation. They had planned to have a showing of the artist's impression of the poet's works where the poems would be read out by the poet himself. Before that nebulous idea could solidify, Ramanujan died of a massive heart attack. But the poems and the idea continued to live.

Soon after Ramanujan's death in 1993, Vasudev got down to work. He went through the poems, in the original and translations, and began interpreting them in his own medium. "I read and reread many of them for the visuals to become precise before I started to draw," says the artist. What finally emerged were 40 line drawings based on Ramanujan's poems.

"What I liked about Ramanujan's poems was their imagery," says Vasudev. "Even [while reading] a poem called *Safety in Love*, which is exactly three lines long, I could imagine a picture." The most artistically interesting was a Kannada poem called *Kuntobille*.

This bringing together of literature and the arts is not new to Vasudev. The artist, who made his mark during the Seventies, has been inspired by other Kannada writers. Jnanpith-winner D.R. Bendre's poem *Kalpa Vriksha Vrindavana* resulted in the idea of the Tree of Life which appears like a leitmotif in Vasudev's paintings. And the use of myths and legends in his works was inspired by Girish Karnad's play *Yayati*.

Ramanujan, well-known for his English poems, was also a skilled Kannada poet. A product of the *Navya* (modern) literary movement in Karnataka, he was instrumental in experimenting with the usage of words and introducing the narrative style in Kannada poetry. His economy of words were like a breath of fresh air in a literary field which had progressed from the 'romantic' era only to get bogged down by an 'absurd' style.

Vasudev's idea is to bring out the poetic perception in Ramanujan's works, expressing them in visual terms. He has attempted a faithful interpretation of Ramanujan's words. Sometimes, he incorporates the words themselves in the drawings, but they may differ in their essence. For instance, the poem titled *Gin* mentions Ahira the beast. What did it look like to Ramanujan? Was it the same way as it does to Vasudev? As a one-horned/tailed/multi-legged creature?

Take the poem about the universally popular game called hopscotch, which talks of the universe unfolding. "The poem looked like a monumental pillar to me," says Vasudev. The visual representation looks like drawings by children — the kind kids all over the world have drawn near their homes.

The exhibition has been to Bangalore and Madras. From 22 February, they will be on show for a week at the India International Centre in Delhi. At the inauguration, Vasudev's works will be on display to readings from Ramanujan's poems. Only the late poet will not be there to recite them. It will be left to literary personalities — Girish Karnad, B.C. Ramachandra Sharma and Keki N. Daruwalla.

"These drawings are my tribute to a great poet of my generation," says Vasudev. His good friend would have definitely felt honoured. •

Gauri Lankesh/Bangalore

(Clockwise from above), a line drawing by S.G. Vasudevan, the artist and poet A.K. Ramanujan

V. GANGADHAR

PRIME TARGET

I.K. Gujral draws flak from sections of the media

Despite the cronyism between I.K. Gujral and sections of the media, it is heartening that the Prime Minister is receiving a lot of flak for some of his actions. In an unusually strong editorial 'Secularist Gujral', Mumbai's *Free Press Journal* slammed him. "Notwithstanding his claim to the contrary, Inder Kumar Gujral has lowered the dignity of the prime ministerial office." It accused the PM of dispensing patronage to his friends and acquaintances alike and creating a '*durbari*' culture.

Interestingly enough, the *FPJ* editorial focussed more on Gujral's active wooing of the media and how three powerful newspaper groups, two of which were engaged in a bitter war over circulation, had lined up behind him because of personal telephone calls to the proprietor-editors, foreign junkets on the PM's jet and visits to the homes and offices of the hot-shot proprietor-editors. Further, the editor of a third publication, thanks to Gujral, found himself secure in his job.

Perhaps, the *FPJ* was not in this favoured group. But the media which frown on politicians showering favours on others, should take a hard look at themselves. The *FPJ* assessment of Gujral was harsh, but correct. "Gujral was not a leader. And was unlikely to become at this late stage of his life. He was an '*akhbari*' leader and was condemned to stay that way all his life notwithstanding liberal distribution of patronage in recent months."

But I was more impressed with the editorial's sharp attack on the so-called 'secular' image of the Prime Minister, particularly after agreeing to contest the Lok Sabha polls for Jalandhar with the support of the Akalis. "That his secularist credentials were shattered the moment he embraced the Akalis for seeking election to Parliament was beyond doubt. But did he have to knock on the doors of every temple, church, mosque and gurdwara in sight to woo the voters?" The paper pointed out that the Akalis made no distinction between the ecclesiastical and temporal authority. "Gujral on the campaign trail cuts a very sorry figure indeed. Time we were rid of charlatans like Gujral."

The Indian Express was equally harsh on the Prime Minister. The paper ridiculed Gujral's obsession with apologies, starting with the one issued by him to Saddam Hussein at the time of the Gulf War and now extending to everything including his contesting the Jalandhar Lok Sabha seat with Akali support. "In Jalandhar, the wheel of the Janata Dal resembles a lotus. Currently, Gujral, the secularist, has no harsh words against the Akali Dal or the BJP, whose benevolence, not the Janata Dal's secularism, is the last resort of a reawakened Punjabi."

The *Express* highlighted the Prime Minister's inaugurating a private television news channel at Race Course Road itself forgetting the fact that, not long ago, his own government had demanded an explanation from the 'undesirable' owners of this channel within 72 hours!

Sonia Gandhi: subject of controversy

I.K. Gujral: lowering the dignity of t

me ministerial office?

Has the Gujral doctrine been turned into a kind of national indoctrination wondered the *Express* editorial.

Taking a stand

By the way, the *FPJ*, started by the nationalist Sadanand in the 1930s is trying hard to recapture its old glory under the editorship of veteran journalist Janardhan Thakur. The layout is brighter while the edit and op-ed pages are highly readable. Thakur himself does a front-page column, 'Poll Talk' which looks at the poll happenings in a slightly different manner.

For instance, he refuses to join the ever-growing Sonia-baiters (including some of his own editorial writers!) and makes a valid point while pointing out that "the intellectuals and the elite of the country could well frown upon Sonia's borrowed lines and gimmickry, but how many of these men and women ever bother to go to the polling booths?

The people who dominate the queues in large parts of the country are those who are taken up by the glitz and glamour and aura of Indira's '*bahu*'. Rajiv Gandhi's '*gharwali*'. And if she was white-skinned, isn't that one of the greatest weaknesses of the Indians? You have only to look up the matrimonial advertisements in the newspapers." Thakur pointed out that hardly anyone among the rural audiences which thronged to welcome Sonia had heard of Quattrochhi, a magnificent obsession with the media. They might well think it was the name of a new brand of biscuits in the market!

The portrait of a fallen hero

As soon as a Congressman is in trouble within his own party, he becomes a 'martyr' in our media. For years, former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, was the media's favourite whipping-boy. But once he was denied a Lok Sabha ticket by the party president, Sitaram Kesri, the fallen hero suddenly developed any number of supporters in the media. But *The Asian Age* editorial 'Mr Rao's Blatant Lie' puts the issue in the right perspective.

At one of his press conferences, Rao evaded responsibility for the destruction of the Babri Masjid claiming it was a 'collective responsibility'. Most of the media dutifully reported this and there was hardly any criticism of Rao. To add to the drama, the former Prime Minister claimed he was too 'distraught' to handle the statement himself

The Asian Age editorial shatters these illusions. Rao was cool and composed on the destruction of the Masjid even as his home minister S.B. Chavan had his contingency plans ready for the eventuality which included stationing of paramilitary forces around Ayodhya. But Rao was not moved to take any action. The BJP president, L.K. Advani, in fact, had said that Rao was at best indifferent to the fate of the Masjid. "The Congress allowed Rao to betray the country as well as loot it through his family (the urea case has to be an outstanding scandal of our times) and only began to discover a few defects after Rao had led the party to its most ignominious defeat in 1996."

I agreed with *The Asian Age* verdict: "Rao has pouted his way through many ups and downs in his five decades or more in politics. It is time that he retired along with his pout. He has done enough damage." •

BOOK OF THE WEEK

Poor show

Frederic C. Thomas gives a sketchy overview of how the poor live in the city of Calcutta

The note on the author says that Frederic C. Thomas of the University of California, Berkeley "has conducted research in Calcutta intermittently over the past ten years". A reading of his book creates an impression that the operative word here is 'intermittently' In his preface, the author proposes to bridge the gap between purely theoretical studies in which "poverty becomes an abstraction" and plain narratives in which the "observations tend to be too anecdotal and relativistic to be of much practical use". In other words, the aim of this study is to provide a macro-view of the "living and working conditions of Calcutta's poor".

Clearly, the task is difficult. The complexity of the problems of Calcutta's poor people would require a much deeper research than a series of 'intermittent' glimpses of the reality and a rather cursory survey of the relevant literature. The result of the author's ten years of research is a sketchy overview of how the poor live in the city of poverty.

The poor have been arranged into basically four overlapping and, therefore problematic, categories — the 'genteel poor', who try to maintain a middle-class appearance, the refugees and migrants, the squatters (the 'real' slum people) and the massive bustee population. The categories are taken up one after another in successive chapters. The discussion is quite readable but not much more than that. In fact, the first thing one misses here is an integrated analysis of these four categories. It is always possible for analytical purposes to classify the poor into different classes and discuss each case separately. But a study that proposes to provide a theoretical framework of analysis must probe the complex and significant linkages among the different types and layers of poverty.

The second and more fundamental problem with this type of study is the inadequate analysis of the dynamics of poverty. It is impossible to understand urban poverty without a clear perception of the process of development of the city and its hinterland. The author is surely aware of this, or else he would not have gone into the history of colonial Calcutta and its demarcation of the white town and the (more or less detached segments of) black town(s), nor would he discuss the urban development projects of the Sixties and Seventies under the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority. But the dynamics of Calcutta's poverty is an integral part of the underdevelopment of the entire eastern region of India. As noted by experts like Ashok Mitra, Calcutta has traditionally been 'India's city'. In particular, it is *the* city of Eastern India. A deep research into the post-Independence development experience of this region would be necessary to even start getting a 'macroview' of Calcutta's poverty. A research programme like this cannot be run intermittently.

But suppose we agree not to be too serious about the idea of

The author speaks of the solidarity of the poor. He notes the communal harmony in some 'mixed areas', the harmony that prevails in spite of the difference and distance between communities. Or, because of it

a macroview or a grand theory. Suppose we choose to be happy with yet another running commentary on the poor people's lives in the city of Joy. In that case, the book is a pretty good one, particularly in the couple of chapters in which the author discusses the problems and prospects of improving the life of the poor, particularly the bustee life. There is a rational emphasis on the need to strike a balance between small and local initiatives and big development projects. The big projects, like those funded by the World Bank, often fail because the lack of local initiative and pressure leads to faulty planning and inadequate accountability, leading in turn to the misuse of funds. But the passionate supporters of decentralisation often forget the need of a critical minimum effort to sustain

EXCERPT

Typically, dwellings are clean and tidy inside, even though they are seriously overcrowded. Outside, however, the garbage and refuse from homes and workshops is dumped not in designated spots or at designated times, but everywhere and at any time along the streets and lanes

the small and local programmes. Funding is a problem in fighting urban poverty.

While discussing local initiatives, the author raises a number of important issues and then, unfortunately, leaves them aside to move on to different questions. One issue of great importance is the 'solidarity of the poor'. The author speaks of the solidarity "acquired through their popular culture and religion". In another context he notes the communal harmony in some 'mixed areas', the harmony that prevails inspite of the difference and distance between different communities. Or, because of it. People who have lived together accepting their difference quite frankly and as a matter of fact are naturally well-disposed to maintain peace and harmony. The solidarity that is built on the mutual respect for each other's 'differentness' is much more dependable than the 'human chains' formed by political leaders and their men for five minutes.

The big question is how to create a long-term and sustainable programme to fight poverty on the basis of this solidarity. The author leaves the question hanging when he concludes by asking for conditions that would help the poor "work out their own solutions" and "make the political structure respond to their needs". Easier said than done. •

Anirban Chattopadhyay

The reviewer is assistant editor, *Anandabazar Patrika*

Calcutta Poor *by Frederic C. Thomas. Published by M.E. Sharpe, New York.*

SHORT TAKES

An adult affair

Among other revolutions taking place in our country, there is the sexual revolution. Sex is no longer a dirty word and sexual inhibitions have been consigned to the winds. This new no-holds-barred promiscuity has been highlighted in this book. In a breezy, simple narrative style.

There was every possibility of the stories' bordering on vulgarity. But the author has very deftly managed to skirt around that. Which has helped the book rise above mediocrity. In fact, it's a good read — and not only for voyeurs.

Despite what appears on the cover, the book is not all sex and eroticism. More importantly, it is a collection of poignant tales — of love and human relationships. Specially worth reading are *The Third Dialogue* and *The Colours of Life*.

Fragrance and Other Adult Tales *by Subrata Sen. Published by Crest Publishing House. Price: Rs 85*

Robin Hood, reincarnated

Remember Humpty Dumpty who had a great fall? The book under review seems to have been constructed on the same lines. It's about the fall of a hero with high ideals. The protagonist is something of a modern-day Robin Hood, robbing the rich to feed the poor and needy.

The plot is rather convoluted. It's full of myriad and diverse characters (stereotypes, mostly) and sagas of love and hate (predictably). And then, there is philosophy (seeking answers to fundamental questions like where does happiness in life lie? Is money the key to happiness? Are godmen and cultmen the catalysts to salvation?).

You may not agree with all the author has to say, but the book deserves a read. One only wishes it was tighter.

Fall of a Hero *by Abhay Maurya. Published by Confluence International. Price: Rs 150*

The complete woman

The book is on the travails of Trilochan — a woman who seeks emancipation and gets it amidst complex situations. The central character yearns for a child from her husband, 'blessed' with mystical powers, but he refuses to come to her aid.

Trilochan turns away to take refuge in the arms of her cousin's husband. She is a woman who matures before her time. Turbulent times, collapse of law and order, strikes, communal riots — she sees them all. At the end of it all she emerges victorious — a woman with a nerve of steel.

The book makes excellent reading, which is highly commendable considering that it is the author's first attempt at writing.

A Partial Woman *by Mina Singh. Published by Kali. Price: Rs 170*

From April, the football wing of East Bengal will be known as United East Bengal Football Team Ltd. The chairman of its board of directors will be Vijay Mallya, the UB Group head

New deal

United Breweries charts out a novel course for Indian football

The FC Kochin experiment may not have been an unqualified success, but its impact on Indian football has been encouraging enough for United Breweries to plan two more "club companies". The two most prized soccer outfits in the country, Mohun Bagan and East Bengal, are set to come under liquor baron Vijay Mallya.

Kalyani Breweries Ltd-FC Kochin is the first professional football club in the country. It has the base of a stadium, a practice pitch and a regular office. Although not yet a limited company on the lines of European clubs, this organisation has brought in the long overdue professional approach to football.

Its impact is already being felt. Most of the leading clubs in the country have had to increase their football budgets substantially to match the fees paid by KBL-FC Kochin. Now, at least Rs 1 crore are needed annually to recruit good players. And footballers themselves have realised the need to concentrate on club football in order to maintain form. They will soon have to leave their jobs if they wish to continue earning the kind of money on offer by the leading clubs.

For the two Calcutta clubs, the going has become really tough over the past two years. Their football budgets have soared from Rs 50 lakh to well over Rs 80 lakh per annum and it is becoming increasingly difficult to find patrons who would advance such amounts without guarantees. East Bengal and Mohun Bagan had talked to companies for sponsorship, but the amounts barely covered 25 per cent of the expenditure. After all, how much could shirt logos fetch?

"We had a good base and strong potential in the south. So, when the trustees of FC Kochin approached us, we felt we could link ourselves to the most popular sport in the country," said UB Group vice-president Deepak Choudhury.

As this was the first time a club name incorporated a company brand, there were initial hiccups. "Now we are sailing smoothly, the feedback is good and, above all, KBL has caught up well with the youth of the south," said Choudhury.

"Football is popular in Kerala. Even more so in Bengal. So, when East Bengal approached us, we thought it was a good idea," he added. Although figures are not being quoted, the money involved could be as much as Rs 2.75 crore a year.

From April, the football wing of the club will be known as United East Bengal Football Team Ltd. Whether or not 'Breweries' will be added later is not yet known. The chairman of its board of directors will be Vijay Mallya, head of the UB Group. The club's football earnings will be ploughed back into the company and the players are expected to endorse products and conduct clinics for juniors.

The deal with Mohun Bagan will take a while longer as the club does not wish to be associated with liquor. Some other modalities will have to be worked out, which means the club's structure will not change till at least the next season.

But UB is happy. It has been able to make an impact on Indian soccer and its followers, first by sponsoring what is now called the KBL Federation Cup, the leading knockout tournament for clubs, and then playing outfits as well. What remains is the building up of a reservoir for young talent. "We'll get that in due course," said Choudhury, posing a challenge to other corporate bodies now on the periphery of sports sponsorship. •

Arijit Sen/Calcutta

It's getting more and more difficult to keep track of Pooja Bhatt's relationships. Barely had all those rumours about an affair with model-turned-actor Marc Robinson died down than it began to be whispered that Bhatt had a new romantic interest: a theatre actor called Aly Khan, who was trying to break into the movies (he is playing the lead in Alyque Padamsee's *Begum Sumroo*).

Apparently, the two were introduced to one another by mutual friends, and hit it off immediately. And these days, Bhatt is a constant presence at the *Begum Sumroo* sets, giving moral support to Khan.

How long this will last is anyone's guess. But, given Pooja's track record, nobody's laying any bets on the relationship surviving this year.

POOJA BHATT

Manisha Koirala has finally admitted what all of Bombay has known for a long time: she is dating a deejay called Hussain. But, adds Koirala, he is not her boyfriend in the conventional sense of the term, but just one of the many men she is seeing at the moment.

Before you dismiss her as a slut, let us hasten to add that Manisha is just partying with these guys, and generally hanging out with them. She's not ready for a full-time relationship right now. And after the debacle called Nana, who can blame her?

MANISHA KOIRALA

The Raveena Tandon-Akshay Kumar-Sunny Deol-Dimple Kapadia four some continues to dominate the gossip columns. To bring you up to date: Raveena and Sunny had a brief reunion while they were shooting together for a film. Akshay found out about the rekindled romance and gave Raveena hell in a very public showdown. Dimple, however, is still oblivious to the fresh threat to her relationship, but keeps a wary eye on Raveena nonetheless.

But what about Pooja Deol, who is Sunny's lawfully wedded wife, and the mother of his two sons? Apparently, she is regarded as being of no consequence by all the major players in this drama. As for Akshay, he is just waiting for his parents to find him a nice Punjabi *kudi*, and then he will lose no time in giving Tandon the heave-ho.

Nice bunch, aren't they?

Talking of model-turned-actors reminds us of Arjun Rampal, who will soon be celebrating a very happy event in his life. Come March, Rampal will wed his girlfriend Mehr Jesia, in a small but classy ceremony.

Here's wishing the couple the best in their wedded life. •

MEHR JESIA

RAVEENA TANDON

Get the PICTURE

Thanks to Internet, now you can go gallery-hopping right within your home

The palette has given way to the mouse. C'olours have been substituted with Coreldraw and graphic paint brushes have replaced the soft-haired traditional ones.

There is a flurry of activity in the art world, in which the website has taken centrestage.

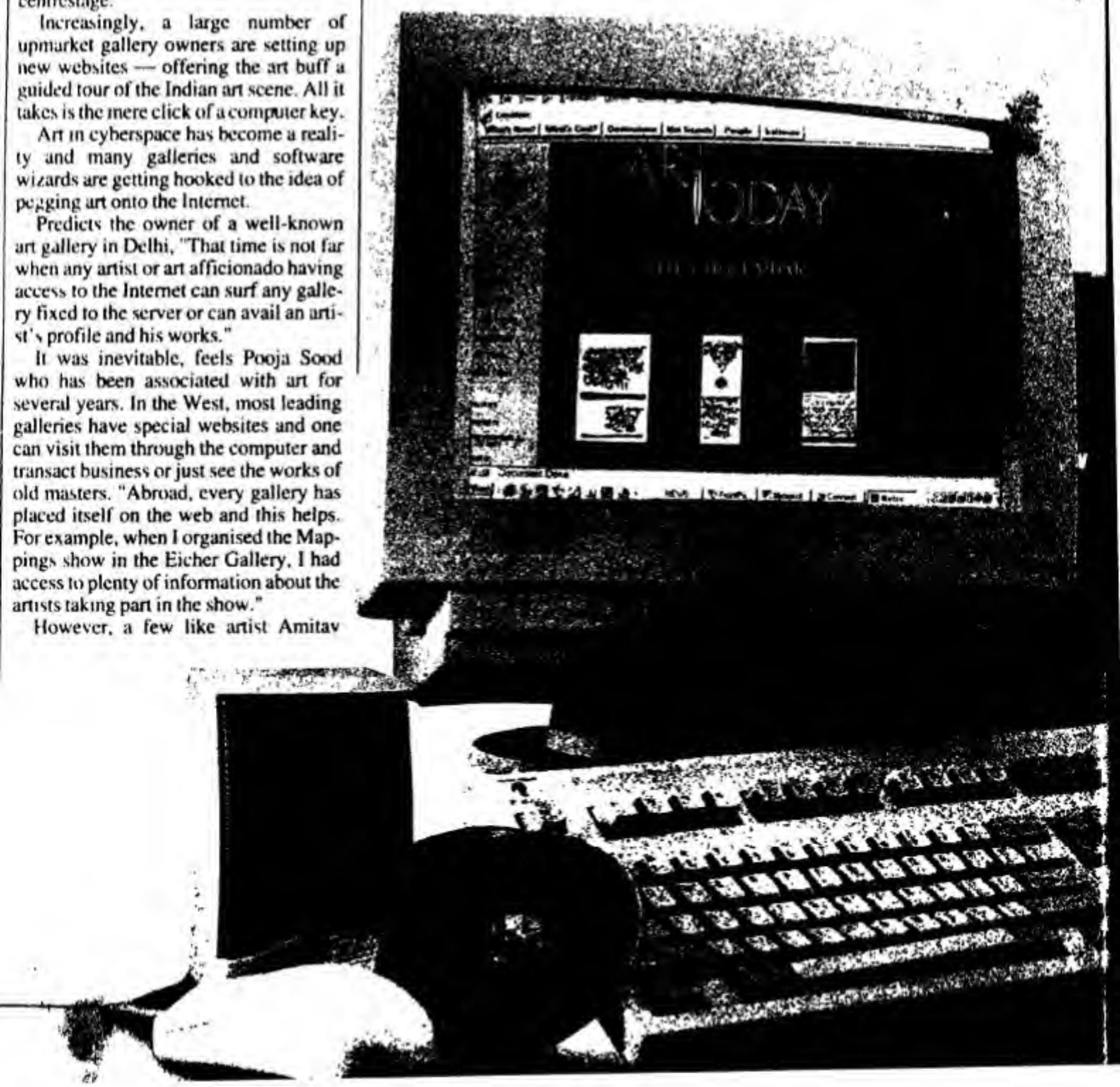
Increasingly, a large number of upmarket gallery owners are setting up new websites — offering the art buff a guided tour of the Indian art scene. All it takes is the mere click of a computer key.

Art in cyberspace has become a reality and many galleries and software wizards are getting hooked to the idea of pegging art onto the Internet.

Predicts the owner of a well-known art gallery in Delhi, "That time is not far when any artist or art afficionado having access to the Internet can surf any gallery fixed to the server or can avail an artist's profile and his works."

It was inevitable, feels Pooja Sood who has been associated with art for several years. In the West, most leading galleries have special websites and one can visit them through the computer and transact business or just see the works of old masters. "Abroad, every gallery has placed itself on the web and this helps. For example, when I organised the Mappings show in the Eicher Gallery, I had access to plenty of information about the artists taking part in the show."

However, a few like artist Amitav



Das feel that it will be quite a while before India can be on par with the West as far as the reach of art-lovers to art through the Internet is concerned.

Yet, a definite progress has been made. Some commendable work has been done by players in the field. The Sakshi Art Gallery, Bombay is one such example.

And, Chandigarh-based Pugmarks Inter Web Pvt. Ltd has set up a special category on art called the Pugmarks Cyber Art Gallery. It makes provision for exclusive websites apart from general gallery listings. The Cyber Art Gallery plans to host special exhibitions of the best works of various artists every month. Individual shows can also be organised on payment of a surcharge.

Similar sites have been set up in Bangalore where a software company named Mindware, which calls its site Mindart Gallery, hopes to feature local artists initially and then gradually add national artists to their list. The Aurodhan Art Gallery in Delhi has set up three sites — http.//www.internetindia.com/culture/art/aurodhan; Maya (awww.digikarma.com/maya) and Exhibitions (www.netfx.net/delhi/exhibit.html).

Art Today was one of the first to be put on the site under the flag of *India Today* — webmaster a.India-Today.com. On its sites one will find reproductions of works by famous artists with various information about them. Specific questions made by connoisseurs are welcome.

All this comes for a price. But website operators feel they can safely bank on patrons of art who want to be informed about what they want to buy. The annual membership fee costs something like a thousand rupees, including a regular listing update. There is an added bonus for the browser — he can order a piece of work through the e-mail. The gallery gets a 20 per cent commission on all sales made through it, which is an incentive for many gallery owners wanting to start their own websites.

As one such proprietor concedes, "Art on the website will help in the globalisation of art. For us, it definitely opens up attractive avenues for income." He revealed that the art business did not have money pouring in, all the time. "There are few visitors to the shows and the works of only a few artists sell. With the website, we can at least save the cost incurred on gallery space and it is possible to entice international buyers as well."

The idea has caught on with big auction houses in India. International auction houses like Sotheby's and Christie's are working on the newly-developed concept of on-line auctions for those who are unable to attend actual auctions. For example, a recent Sotheby's auction was listed on the net and interested bidders could access it. The officials at the auction house are hopeful that soon they would be able to conduct bulk of their business through the net.

Opening a website is fairly simple. Colour transparencies of paintings are scanned and stored as high-resolution graphic images. The on-line galleries feature the name of the artists with their paintings. A mail order form can be obtained should any painting catch the surfer's fancy.

To make one's choice known, the art buyer only has to click the mouse when his desired painting appears on screen. Payment can be made through credit cards and the particular gallery in India can cash the amount locally.

The website offers not merely visual pleasure but aural too. The video-phone facility which some galleries have access to enables one to have an on-line dialogue with the artist. Apart from routine enquiries about pricing, artists can hold discussions about their works, concepts and techniques. Another fillip for art and its lovers.

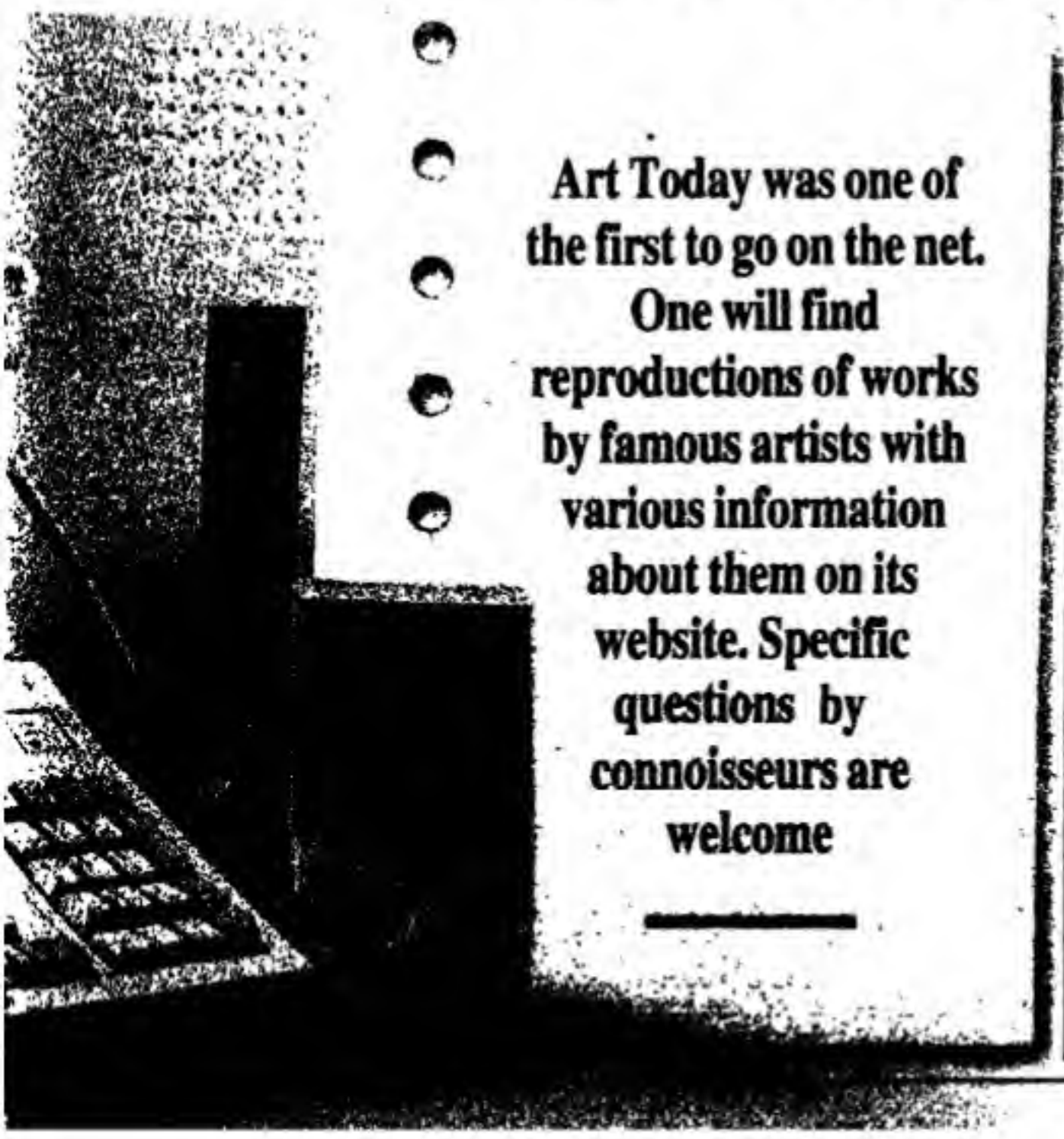
But is the increasing popularity of these floating galleries weaning away the compulsive gallery visitor? Pooja Sood does not think so. "On the contrary, it will provide the foundation [for initiating more people into art] and impetus. Nothing can be better than seeing the real thing with your eyes."

And then there is the expenditure factor — the operational costs being quite high. A home page along with supportive software could cost over a lakh of rupees.

But then, not many are complaining. At least, not at the moment.

Until the day virtual galleries start giving competition to real galleries and people stop differentiating between art and cyber art, they are only too glad to have the world of art at their fingertips. •

Pallavi Ghosh/New Delhi



WEST BENGAL

War of words

The SUCI organises a Bangla Bandh to press for the reintroduction of English from Class-I

It was to be the first *bandh* in West Bengal since *bandhs* were banned by the Supreme Court. And it was one *bandh* that was based on a specific issue: 'education'. So, eyebrows were raised when the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI) gave the call for a 24-hour Bangla Bandh on 3 February.

The demand was twofold: reintroduction of English from Class-I in vernacular-medium schools of West Bengal; and bringing back the system of "pass-fail" at the primary-level. Earlier, the SUCI had gathered nearly 1.2 crore signatures and submitted a memorandum to this effect to chief minister Jyoti Basu. When nothing came out of these 'moderate' moves, the party decided to force the issue by calling a *bandh*.

The day passed off without any major incident in Calcutta and its suburbs. Highly-motivated SUCI cadres tried, with some success, to block railway tracks and prevent daily passengers from entering the city on their way to work. Even children were seen squatting on the tracks.

In the West Bengal capital, many shops downed their shutters; schools remained shut; and traffic was far less than normal. A policeman on duty at the sensitive Hazra crossing in south Calcutta pointed out: "Some shops are, no doubt, closed but some are also open. There is no compulsion." In a number of places, the police had to resort to lathi-charge in order to disperse demonstrators.

At the end of the day, SUCI state secretary Prabhash Ghosh claimed that the *bandh* was "successful" while the state administration insisted that "life was normal". And two Calcutta advocates added a twist to the tale by filing for damages from the SUCI, claiming that they had suffered 'loss of income' due to the *bandh* call.

The *bandh*, to the surprise of many a political observer, was a partial success. This despite the fact that SUCI has neither the base nor the organisation compared to the CPI(M) or the Opposition Congress. So, a faint suggestion of tacit support for the *bandh* among the people could not be ruled out.

But what prompted the people's compliance? For some, it was the SUCI cadres' image as potential troublemakers that was the deciding factor. They stayed indoors fearing trouble.

There were many, however, who were genuinely sympathetic towards the issue raised by the SUCI. They included leading intellectuals and opinion-makers in Calcutta. 'We are not supporting the *bandh*, but we do support the cause', was their unanimous line.

Explains leading litterateur Sunil Gangopadhyay: "Today, the time has come to rethink the issue of reintroduction of English from Class-I as it is no longer a foreign language but a common language used at the national level."

The question of reintroduction of English has been doing the rounds in the ruling Left Front circles, though the CPI(M)'s stated position is against such a move. Since 1983,

ARKO DUTTA

LANGUAGE BARRIER: *an SUCI demonstrator vs Calcutta Police*

PRADIP SANYAL

CALLING ALL CHILDREN: *kids block trains coming into Calcutta on the day of the* bandh

English was dropped from the Class-I curriculum and introduced from Class-V. But over the years, students from West Bengal have been falling behind in all-India competitive examinations and their lack of proficiency in English has been a major cause. The result has been the mushrooming of tutorial homes where students brush up their English skills, often at exorbitant costs.

"As a journalist, I feel that this is the right time to raise the demand for English in lower classes," says Suman Chattopadhyay, executive editor of the *Anandabazar Patrika*. "If the CPI(M) can admit that its decision not to join the Centre was a historic blunder, then why is it reluctant to admit this mistake and rectify it by reintroducing English at the primary level?" he argues.

Over the last decade, the loss of job opportunities, largely due to the English handicap, has frustrated the Bengali middle class. Sensing this, the CPI(M) recently gave the call for an all-party meeting to review the Left Front's position on the teaching of English. Front partners like the CPI, the RSP and others have by and large welcomed such a move. Inaugurating the Calcutta Book Fair, chief minister Jyoti Basu has also stressed the need to reintroduce English, though his party is still opposed to the idea.

"We are not rigid. If the reintroduction of English is the only way to hasten educational progress, then there is always a possibility of its return at the primary level," clarifies Anil Biswas, member of the CPI(M)'s state secretariate. "If needed, another commission would be set up to study the demand," adds Biswas, who looks after the party's education cell.

Pradesh Congress Commiteee (PCC) president Somen Mitra dismisses the Left's recent initiative to break the language barrier as a ploy to garner middle-class votes. "Sensing the middle class' resentment, they are now talking of reintroducing English. After the elections, everything will be forgotten," observed Mitra. •

Sourabh Sen and Soumen Datta/Calcutta

ASSAM

Fear psychosis

The ULFA's boycott call casts a shadow over the elections

As the poll campaign enters home stretch in Assam and every political unit makes a desperate bid to woo the electorate, the 'election boycott' call given by the outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) has cast an ominous shadow over this north-eastern state.

On 3 February, the ULFA's publicity secretary Mithinga Daimary issued a statement, announcing that the outfit had imposed a ban on electioneering and was appealing to all sections of workers of all political parties, and the candidates, to immediately stop their election campaigns.

According to Daimary, the outfit had asked all political parties to make their positions on the ULFA's demand for an "Independent Assam" clear but none of them had cared to do so. On the contrary, they had ignored the ULFA's "humble appeal" with disdain. The ULFA, therefore, had banned electioneering, with effect from 3 February. "Stop wasting time and energy on a futile exercise like the elections and instead devote (yourselves) to useful activities," was the ULFA's advice to the people of Assam.

SAFETY FIRST: *armymen in Assam*

Several political parties have appealed to the ULFA to review its decision at this critical juncture. Nandeswar Talukdar, central committee member of the CPI(M), has urged the people to participate in the election by ignoring the boycott call. "Election is a democratic process and so it (ULFA) has no right to call for boycotting the election," said the veteran Marxist leader.

CPI leader Bhogeswar Dutta said that the ULFA should not hinder the democratic process. And he was optimistic that there would be 60 per cent polling in the coming elections, despite the ULFA's call.

Derhagra Muchahary, leader of the People's Democratic Front (PDF), feels that the ULFA or any other insurgent group must not boycott the polls. Instead, they should support "perfect candidates" so that they can raise their demands on the Floor of Parliament.

Meanwhile, state home department officials are working

overtime to try and ensure free and peaceful polling in the 11,000 "sensitive booths", 70 per cent of the total of 17,606 polling booths, for the 14 Lok Sabha seats in Assam. Out of these, 2,600 booths have been identified as 'super-sensitive'

ACTING TOUGH: *CM Mahanta*

The state government has already asked for 609 additional companies of paramilitary forces from the Centre to maintain law and order before, during and after the voting on 16 February.

Chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta has assured the people that elections will be held in spite of the ban imposed by the ULFA. Mahanta has declared that "the people of Assam want peace" and that is what the government will strive to ensure.

According to Mahanta, the contest in the state will be between the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP)-led coalition and the Congress. The CM appears confident that the ruling combine will bag ten out of the 14 seats.

But the ULFA's boycott call and its recent attacks on AGP activists in some districts have caused panic in the state's political ranks. Several political workers in 'sensitive' areas of the state are reluctant to risk earning the militant's ire. Election meetings in several places have been cancelled or shifted to 'safer' places. Many candidates have preferred to maintain a low profile and the turnout at rallies, especially in the interiors, has dropped sharply. •

Dilip Chandan/Guwahati

WEST BENGAL

Kidnapped!

The governments of India and Bangladesh ignore a mother's year-long crusade for her 'abducted' child

For more than a year now, Bina Devi Santhalia, of Rishipur village under Kaliachak police station in Malda, has been running from administrative pillar to diplomatic post. Her mission in life: to get back her five-year-old son, Rinku.

Pankaj (Rinku) Kumar Santhalia was, allegedly, kidnapped by his uncle, Arjun Prasad Agarwalla, of Chuadanga in Bangladesh, on 15 December, 1996. Since then, Bina Devi has knocked on every conceivable door in her distress. But to no avail. She has appealed to the President, the Prime Minister and the home minister of India; the Prime Minister of Bangladesh; the Governor and the chief minister of West Bengal. But, laments Bina Devi, no one has extended a helping hand.

Tragedy struck the Santhalia family in Rishipur village on a grim, winter day. Bina Devi recalls: "My youngest son Rinku had gone to his uncle Pawan Kumar Santhalia's house nearby, that fateful day. From there, Rinku was kidnapped by his other uncle, Arjun Prasad, a Bangladeshi national, a resident of Chuadanga. We came to know about the whole episode two days after my son was kidnapped."

On 17 December, Bina Devi and her husband, Damodar

Ethical business

Eastern India can look forward to British corporate investment in the environmental sector

Western investors largely agree that whatever the composition of the government after the elections, the ongoing process of economic reforms in India is irreversible. Britain is one of the countries which would like to do more business with India in the near future and plans to raise its current investments of 3 billion pounds to 5 billion pounds by the end of the millennium.

India is one of ten 'focus markets' for Britain, which also looks forward to expanding its operations in eastern India. The two-day interactions among the entrepreneurs and government representatives of the two countries held recently in Calcutta, organised by the Indo-British Partnership, focussed on Investing in the Eastern Region's Future.

Industrial development, however, brings with it a number of contentious issues, the effect on environment being a major one. The Environment Mission from the UK took part in the deliberations in order to address this question.

"The mission really is a fact-finding one: to gather information about what are the real activities going on, what are the real problems, and the potential for trade between the two countries," explained mission leader Richard Blythe.

DEBASHISH ROY

EAST MEETS WEST: *the Indo-British meet in Calcutta*

According to Simon Scaddan, British deputy high commissioner in Calcutta, checking environmental degradation and pollution in India would require huge capital investment, to the tune of US$ 3 billion. Around US$ 1.2 billion has already been invested, but that has addressed only a fraction of the problem.

Unlike the usual bureaucrat-populated 'aid' missions, 'this one comprised more people from the industry. The leader, Blythe, was from Glaxo Wellcome. The other

Santhalia, lodged a complaint at Kaliachak police station. Later, they came to know that their four-year-old son had been abducted by Damodar's brother, Arjun Prasad, and whisked away to Bangladesh.

Police officials in Malda did not pay much attention to the case. In the face of such administrative apathy, a desperate Bina Devi went over to her brother Niju Kumar Agarwalla in Syedpur, Bangladesh, in October '97. Niju, a journalist, contacted Arjun Prasad over telephone and tried to persuade him to return Rinku to his mother.

The tape-recorded conversation between Niju and Arjun was made public at a press conference in Syedpur. Arjun Prasad voiced his demand: the property of Damodar Santhalia. A distraught Bina Devi feared the worst: the feud between the two brothers had endangered her son's life.

Soon, Arjun Prasad added a different dimension to the case by claiming that he had adopted Rinku. "I have legally adopted Rinku and so the allegation of kidnapping him does not arise any more," he told a newspaper in Bangladesh. According to Arjun, his elder brother, Damodar Santhalia, had made an affidavit before a 'notary' public in Calcutta regarding the adoption of Rinku, on 20 October, 1995.

But Bina Devi dismisses Arjun's story. Recently, she told reporters at Raiganj: "I am Rinku's mother and so I am his natural guardian. Thereby I should have the full knowledge of this adoption episode as claimed by Arjun. I am sure that he has forged documents and now he is claiming that he has adopted my Rinku. All his claims are false. His sole intention is to extort money from us."

This kidnapping drama was given extensive coverage by the Bangladeshi media. On 6 October, 1997, *The Independent*, an English daily published from Dhaka, wrote: "A wailing mother from India has drawn the attention of the

MISSING BOY: *Pankaj Kumar Santhalia*

Home Minister for getting back her five-year-old son, who has allegedly been held hostage in a relative's house for the last ten months...The Superintendent of Police (SP) of Chuadanga said they knew the matter recently and talked to Arjun Agarwalla who allegedly abducted his nephew from India. 'Arjun told us that the boy is his adopted son whom he (Arjun) brought long ago from his (the boy) parents,' said the SP...."

The Bengali daily *Dainik Janata* probed further: "From a tape-recorded telephonic conversation between Arjun and Niju, it was clear that Arjun was demanding to have possession of Damodar's house at Rishipur in Malda. He wanted the money he had given to his brother Damodar also." How could a "reputed" businessman like Arjun Prasad pass on money illegally to India, wondered the *Dainik Janata* and urged human rights organisations to come forward and help a mother get back her son.

Meanwhile, on 20 November 1997, Calcutta Doordarshan quoted police sources to state that Rinku was 'missing'. On 25 November, Bina Devi sent a protest letter to the regional director, Doordarshan, informing him that Rinku was not merely 'missing', he had been 'kidnapped'.

Bina Devi finally has decided to turn to the 'goddess of justice'. On 4 December, 1997, she filed a case in the court of the chief judicial magistrate in Malda against Pawan Kumar Santhalia, Chhanda Devi Santhalia, Kailash Agarwalla, Narayan Prasad Agarwalla, Nirmala Devi Agarwalla and Arjun Prasad Agarwalla.

And now she lives in the hope that some day justice will be done and she will be reunited with her son. •

Iva Guha/Siliguri

firms represented were Oceans Environmental, Rechem Field Services, Shanks & McEwan, Bronzeoak, Mott MacDonald, the Babite Group and Delphi International. These companies specialise in various sectors such as industrial waste management, new and renewable energy and water resources development.

In West Bengal, there are a number of areas that need 'nature-analogous technologies', P. Sanyal, chief environment officer of the state government told the mission. These are: coastal pollution caused by mushrooming aquaculture firms, urban pollution caused by industry and automobiles, diminishing forest cover, health and ecological degradation, and, above all, arsenic poisoning of the groundwater in vast areas.

Hydrogeologist Peter Ravenscroft, who has been working on the arsenic problem in Bangladesh for Mott MacDonald, told SUNDAY that there were already "unofficial" talks on similar kind of work in West Bengal. Ashesh Roy, chief engineer, public health engineering department, said that the systematic survey and monitoring of the situation throughout the state needed huge investments.

And this is where British corporate partnership has a role to play. The mission, said Blythe, would submit its report by the end of April and hold seminars in the UK to "raise awareness". Then there will be "individual follow-ups" and "targeted inward and outward missions". •

Nilanjan Dutta/Calcutta

NATURE

Killer coast

Olive Ridley turtles are dying by the thousands in Orissa

Olive Ridley sea turtles are dying by the thousands along the Orissa coastline. A major rookery, stretching over 30 kms from Chandrabhaga in Konark to Nuanai river in Puri district, is the worst hit. This stretch falls well within the jurisdiction of the Konark-Balukhand wildlife sanctuary area, managed by the forest department of the government of Orissa.

"At a time when the female sea turtles should have been celebrating their annual arrival on the sprawling sandy beaches of this Konark-Balukhand coast, thousands of dead bodies litter the area which is stinking of decomposed flesh and bones," Chitta Behera, director, Project Swarajya, told SUNDAY

Behera was in Konark as the shocking incident was surveyed and video-recorded from 15 to 25 January by a six-member team of Project Swarajya, an NGO. Out of the 30 kms stretch of the Konark-Balukhand coastline along the Konark-Puri Marine Drive, the surveyors could cover only about 5 kms, comprising the Chandrabhaga beach, the Ramachandi Tanda beach and the Nuanai estuary beach. In this area itself, the surveyors found more than 2,000 sea turtles lying dead At this rate, more than 10,000 dead turtles must have been washed ashore, till 25 January, along the 30-km.-long coastaline!

The largest concentration of dead turtles was found on the Tanda beach, located in front of the famous Ramachandi Temple Here, stray dogs, crows and sea gulls could be seen feasting on the dead turtles washed ashore. Kumar Kandy, president of the Chandrabhaga Photographers Association (CPA), explained how the "mass death" of sea turtles had polluted the surrounding environment and kept locals and tourists away from the Chandrabhaga beach and *ghat*. After the CPA lodged a complaint with the Konark NAC, the authorities deployed sweepers to bury the dead turtles. The locals, too, lent a helping hand. "Tourists were staying away from this beach, affecting us all," said Raghunath Nayak, a guide. The local populace, here, is heavily dependent on the sea and sand for its livelihood.

It was much the same story on the Gahirmatha beach. Despite the Orissa government's decision to create a marine sanctuary off the Bhitarkanika coast for the protection of Olive Ridley sea turtles, over 1,100 turtles have died here since November '97, alleged Banka Bihari Das. According to the noted environmentalist, 210 dead sea turtles were washed ashore in November '97; the number went up to 687 in December '97; and another 250 dead turtles had been found on the beach till 10 January, 1998.

When contacted, the principal chief conservator of forest and wildlife, Saroj Pattanaik, told SUNDAY that Banka Bihari Das and other environmentalists "might be right".

All this is a repeat, on a larger scale, of what happened last year and drew international attention. On 29 August, 1997, Jeanetta Wyneken, president, 17th Annual Symposium on Sea Turtle Conservation and Biology, Dept of Biological Sciences, Florida Atlantic University, USA, had written to Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral. The letter, written on behalf of the 738 participants at the symposium, said: "This year, concerns about the conservation of the Olive Ridley sea turtles that nest at beaches in the state of Orissa were raised. Gahirmatha beach has provided nesting habitat for turtles. The Olive Ridley sea turtle that nest at Gahirmatha converge on this and adjacent tiny stretches of the Orissa coast between the months of January and April, and each year have repeated a ritual, more ancient than even the Vedas..."

"But unfortunately, recent informations indicate that the protections as currently provided and enforced by various government agencies are inadequate. On some days in February of this year, more than a dozen trawlers were seen from a single point on the beach, and the intensity of fishing activity was very high in these waters. We learned that in March, over 4,000 Olive Ridley turtles washed up dead on Gahirmatha beach alone, and their deaths were caused by being captured and drowned by the trawlers fishing off shore of the beach. All this is transpiring even though there is a clearly gazzetted closed fishing area in front of the beach and 20 kms out to sea."

Banka Bihari Das, Chitta Behera and other environmentalists in Orissa blame "fishing trawlers" for the ills plaguing the Orissa coast. "While the fisheries department has been issuing licences to trawler owners indiscriminately, it never cares to take stringent action against the vessels which carelessly fish

TRAGIC SIGHT: *dead Olive Ridley turtles dot a Konark beach*

SURENDRA PATRA

SUBHENDRA PATRA

CRITICAL ANALYSIS: *a survey boat traversing the waters*

within the sanctuary limit," declares Banka Bihari Das.

"Laws are there, but the willingness of the law-enforcement authority is not there," observes B.B. Das. The coast-guard have been "active" and apprehended 40 trawlers for crossing the sanctuary limits. But these trawlers are handed over to the forest authorities who, in turn, let the errant trawlers go within three-four days after extracting a minimal fine. This has encouraged trawler owners to go on breaking the rules, for a small price.

Das has demanded that the government should interfere and cancel the licences of all 'killer' trawlers. "Also, the use of gill-net must be stopped immediately if the sea turtles are to be saved," adds Das.

The state forest department's apathy is best summed up by the sight of dead turtles dumped on the beach at the mouth of Nuanai river in Puri district, just 25 kms from Konark and 10 kms from Puri town, opposite the Puri-Konark Marine Drive, where the Sea Turtle Research Centre (STRC), under the Konark-Balukhand wildlife sanctuary, is situated. But the STRC, notwithstanding its strategic location in the turtle-inhabited estuary, has remained defunct for the last ten years.

Two years back, an international workshop was organised by the department of fisheries, government of Orissa, Project Swarajya, in technical collaboration with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), department of commerce, USA. During the three-day seminar, NMFS representative Join P. Mitchell, had demonstrated a simple Turtle Excluder Device (TED) developed by the NMFS in the mid-Eighties to save sea turtles. This low-cost device, made of steel or aluminium, is fixed to the trawler nets and if any turtle accidentally comes inside the net, it is allowed to escape safely.

Trawler owners like Tarun Pattanaik, who were present at the workshop, had hailed the TED but not a single proprietor has installed the device in his boat yet. Pattanaik, who is the president of the Trawler Association, insists that installing the device is not feasible as there is no TED factory in India. And the state government, which had thanked the NMFS for the TED, is not really bothered. Fisheries minister Prakash Chandra Devta told SUNDAY that it was up to the trawler owners to show interest about the TED. The reason that the device is yet to catch on is simple: it will reduce the 'catch'.

So, while trawler owners strive to maximise profits and an apathetic administration turns a blind eye, Olive Ridely turtles in Orissa struggle to survive. •

Surendra Patra/Konark

TELEVISION — SHUBHRA GUPTA

Round the clock

The 24-hour STAR news channel couldn't have been better timed

So R. Basu pulled it off, finally. In a quiet coup last week, STAR TV's CEO put on India's first 24-hour news channel, focussing exclusively on the elections.

The politicians present at the inauguration at 7 Race Course Road, the PM's residence, represented rival parties: apart from host I.K. Gujral, there was Jitendra Prasada (Congress-I), and Jaswant Singh (BJP), and from the manner in which they made encouraging noises about the new channel, it was clear that they all need it.

The timing is just right: a fortnight before the elections, what better than a channel devoted to the poll process? And the fact that Prannoy Roy and the NDTV team is doing it makes it sweeter: with its carefully-built reputation of fairness and speed, and going by past record, there should be fewer chances of bias on this than on other channels.

As Basu put it, if there is any perception of bias, please bring it to the notice of the chief election commissioner,

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK: *Prannoy Roy*

M.S. Gill. The CEC, who was sitting alongside the political heavies, acknowledged the gesture, as he told us about how poll-related coverage has added infinitely to the knowledge of the voter since the last elections.

Actually, television has been making us poll-wise right from the time Doordarshan first went live for the counting of votes: we saw the new government take shape even as the putative *netas* came on to say their bit. With every successive election after that, television has been grabbing more attention and time. the present Lok Sabha elections are set to generate a massive, never-seen-before outpouring of sound-bites, speeches and psephology. By the end of it, we should be a very informed electorate.

At the time of writing, the new channel is only three days old, but it has already begun making a difference to the way we are looking at these elections. If nothing else, then by being available on tap, all round the clock. •

SUNDAY WEEK

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 15 FEBRUARY, 1998

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

Something decisive has to be done about a relationship. Social engagements may have to be verified or cancelled. Don't leave matters as they are; if necessary, be motivated by material considerations. Tolerate a problem just for the sake of maintaining peace if you can't beat them, join them.

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

A friendship could be risked. This is something that could upset you, so don't jump to hasty conclusions. If someone is going off, be good enough to wave farewell. Later in the week, you stand a good chance of meeting sociable friends. Neighbours will be a good source of entertainment.

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

Studies can be interrupted. An early break will possibly throw your arrangements out of gear. Too much may be expected from a social worker who is truly overworked. Make a clear case if you have something to say, even if you upset someone. There is no easy way out of a travel problem.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

Don't solve a problem in a hurry as you might forget something vital. Private advice you receive is not reliable and you can be put on the wrong track. A letter may give you a jolt. An examination can be preponed and you may feel nervous.

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

Someone will show his/her love for you with a special gift. Keep things in store so that you can use them as a surprise, later on in the week; but someone can jump the gun. A relationship can be prospering. You may be considering a change of status even though it may be a little too early.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

Time is not in your favour. Officials can slow you down. Travelling will be tedious. Parental disagreement seems possible, though you may wonder why you are being challenged. You may appear to be missing the boat. Neighbours can make life difficult.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

Your public image must be safeguarded. Some unfriendly folk may not agree with what you are trying to achieve. Take note of people in the background who are completely on your side and don't lose faith. The approaching break should keep you in good spirits and in a friendly state of mind.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

Keep clear of people who take too many chances. Look after your family funds. Don't let a partner out of your sight if there is money to be handled, and part of it is yours. Someone you love can be in a mess; you may find it difficult to lend help.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

Make yourself understood. Reliable support can come from a publisher or a public relations-type who knows when he sees a bargain. Look for a wider market if you have talent to sell. Visit a close relative Travel problems can crop up if you have not taken into account your travel needs.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

An opportunity beckons in a roundabout way. So, while things may look rough from one angle, you will find something else that will ease the strain. An anonymous benefactor may send you a gift. Make a move to boost your personal resources. Pleasant ways of making money may come along.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

The love of someone special should help you overcome or tolerate all hitches. It would be an excellent time for home entertaining if you want to further a good cause or take another step along the road to marriage. A reliable source may let you down regarding some vital information.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

Do not rush anything. Business can be taxing and heavy responsibilities may be on your shoulders. Don't put company funds at risk. A time-limit may be imposed on you. Sacrifice personal pleasures if you intend to achieve results at work. •

Out of work

The one person who is completely relaxed in the middle of the heat and din of the campaign is the one who hopes to be Prime Minister — Sitaram Kesri.

Ever since Sonia Gandhi has stepped into the election scene, Kesri has had little or no work. Although, there's hardly any time left for the polls to end, he hasn't even addressed five election meetings. He's parked cosily in his Purana Qila Road house

Sitaram Kesri: cooling his feet

in New Delhi, playing cards with colleague Rajni Ranjan Sahu all day long. His day actually begins with an hour long scrutiny of the newspapers, with a running commentary on who's managed to plant which story where.

Never has any Congress president had it so easy in an election. But Kesri's logic is: when others are happy to rush around and address meetings why should he steal their thunder?

It is hard to find fault with this.

From politics to psephology

Former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda recently voiced the disgust of many politicians when he criticised those 'who live in farm house, have no connection with the people, and make poll predictions'.

The target of his attack was obvious. Arun Nehru's poll predictions have been appearing almost every week. Politicians, who he predicts will lose, view him as a Trojan horse, who was till recently one of them and jumped ship to become a self-appointed psephologist.

The fact is that Arun Nehru would have been a great asset to any political party had hr not been universally disliked and distrusted. He tried to return to the Congress both under the presidentship of Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesri. Both did not respond to overtures, because both, being wise men, knew that once Nehru rejoined the party, he would begin the same kind of intrigue and plotting that used to go on during the Rajiv Gandhi days.

Which is a pity. With his brains and his capacity to manipulate people, Nehru would have made the archetypal Indian politician.

> HEARD IN THE MINISTRY OF INDUSTRY
>
> **They can say what they like — but it's Tata to Maruti.**
>
> A BUREAUCRAT ON REPORTS THAT SUZUKI AND THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA HAD MADE UP TO FACE THE CHALLENGE FROM THE TATAS' SMALL CAR

Hop, step and fly

Politicians seem to have forgotten about campaigning by road. In this election, political parties are worrying about how they're going to cope with Election Commission queries about candidates' expenditure — because everyone wants a helicopter.

Mulayam Singh Yadav has a helicopter on standby even if he wants to travel from south Delhi to north Delhi. As defence minister, he's enetitled to it, though he really shouldn't be using government facilities for election purposes. Mayawati and Kanshi Ram have separate helicopters, which they use to hop from constituencies. Ram Vilas Paswan, Laloo Yadav and even Sharad Yadav, don't seem to have any compunctions about using helicopters for travelling. Shatrughan Sinha has refused to go campaigning unless he has a helicopter.

Mulayam Singh Yadav: chopper-happy

In the old days, politicians used to drive up to constituencies and be pelted with rotten tomatoes, potatoes and other missiles as a punishment for the state of the roads. Now they've no idea what the roads are like — because they don't use them any more, not even once in five years.

The fall-out of this is that aviation companies are doing great business. Sahara Airlines has bought four new helicopters to meet the demand. Rita Singh of Mescos may not be able to win elections herself, but she reckons she can help others — by hiring out her eight helicopters.

And the electorate is working out how to fashion missiles which can reach targets in helicopters. •

CHECK-LIST

States and Assembly elections

■ **Rajasthan:** Is going to the polls in October. Given the fact that there is a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in power will benefit if the BJP comes to power at the Centre.

■ **Madhya Pradesh:** Assembly elections are due later this year. With Digvijay Singh in the saddle, expect early Assembly polls if the BJP comes to power at the Centre.

■ **Gujarat:** The life of the Assembly has been extended artifically so many times that the BJP is confident of winning on its own. Though dates are yet to be decided, the Assembly elections this time round, will sound the death knell for Shankarsinh Vaghela and his little army.

■ **Delhi:** With M.L. Khurana out of the way (he's contesting the Lok Sabha), Sahib Singh Verma is hopeful of retaining his government in the Capital when the elections are held in October.

Security hazard

Although Sonia Gandhi hasn't yet done anything to make anyone angry, her children have already begun to worry about her security.

Priyanka Vadra and Rahul Gandhi have together written a letter to the Prime Minister pointing out that state governments are being grossly negligent about security at Sonia Gandhi's public meetings.

They say that state governments need to be given stricter guidelines about ensuring their mother's safety. They've cited several security lapses they've noticed at meetings, which have been potential threats.

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has got so worried at this letter, that principal secretary to the Prime Minister, N.N. Vora called a meeting of secretaries to discuss how this issue could be addressed so that no one had any complaints. They don't want to take any risks in the last few days of the caretaker government.

HEARD IN THE PMO

If he becomes Prime Minister we'll have files cleared on a case to Kesri basis.

A BUREAUCRAT ON SITARAM KESRI AS PRIME MINISTER

Sonia Gandhi: safety first

Promotion denied

Former welfare secretary Mata Prasad hasn't got his promotion orders — which means the next government will not be able to make him Cabinet secretary even if it wants to.

Here is the full story.

Prasad was to retire on 31 January. The government gave him a year's extension with a promotion. He was to get the Cabinet secretary's scale of pay after 31 January, which would have made him eligible for the post itself after the current incumbent T.S.R. Subramaniam retired on 31 March.

However, 31 January went by and Prasad didn't get his orders. Why, he doesn't know. As a result, his extension period began on 1 February. Government rules say that an officer cannot be promoted after he's on an extension — which means Prasad stays stuck where he is.

So if someone goes to court in protest against his 'supersession' when the new government appoints another Cabinet secretary, the government has a ready excuse — that his promotion orders reached after the date of his retirement.

For the Dalits this is one more instance of how the government can manipulate the system to deny Dalits a chance (Mata Prasad is a Dalit officer from the general quota). However, this also clears the way for either Yogesh Chandra or Prabhat Kumar — the chairman of the Indian Trade Promotion Organisation (ITPO) and the textiles secretary respectively — to become the Cabinet secretary.

Behind the scenes

The vice chairman of the Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT), Jose B. Verghese, resigned from the CAT citing personal reasons. But his colleague S.Biswas, stays on in the tribunal.

The two-member team of Verghese and Biswas had stayed the extension of Cabinet secretary T.S.R. Subramaniam. This stay was overruled by the Delh High Court, which said that the CAT could not act on applications of all and sundry and stay extensions — applications before the CAT would only be filed by an aggrieved party.

Had the extension been stayed and upheld by court, the person who would have profited the most would have been Mata Prasad, the former welfare secretary.

The full story is that Biswas had worked with Mata Prasad in the ministry of welfare. He was the one who admitted into the CAT, a lawyer's petition against an extension to T.S.R. Subramaniam. If the court turned the petition down, Biswas should have quit along with Verghese.

For the record, Verghese says his resignation had nothing to do with the judgement, only with the uncertainty of tenure of a job in the CAT. Be that as it may, the wrong man resigned. •

CHECK-LIST

Love and Asian politicians: lessons Bill Clinton should learn

Jawaharlal Nehru: Became a widower early on in life and we now know that he worshipped Edwina Mountbatten. But he never allowed his affection for her to affect his political judgement or cloud his personal integrity.

Gen. H.M. Ershad: The Bangladesh President had to pay a heavy political price for his dalliance. But he married for a second time, the woman he really loved — and ended his political career by landing in jail.

Sanjay Singh: Defied the whole world and married the love of his life, even though this caused an unsavoury scandal and involved Sanjay Singh and Amita in a murder case.

Farooq Abdullah: Has never denied the fact that he likes the company of beautiful women. But never has he let this interfere with his professional duties.

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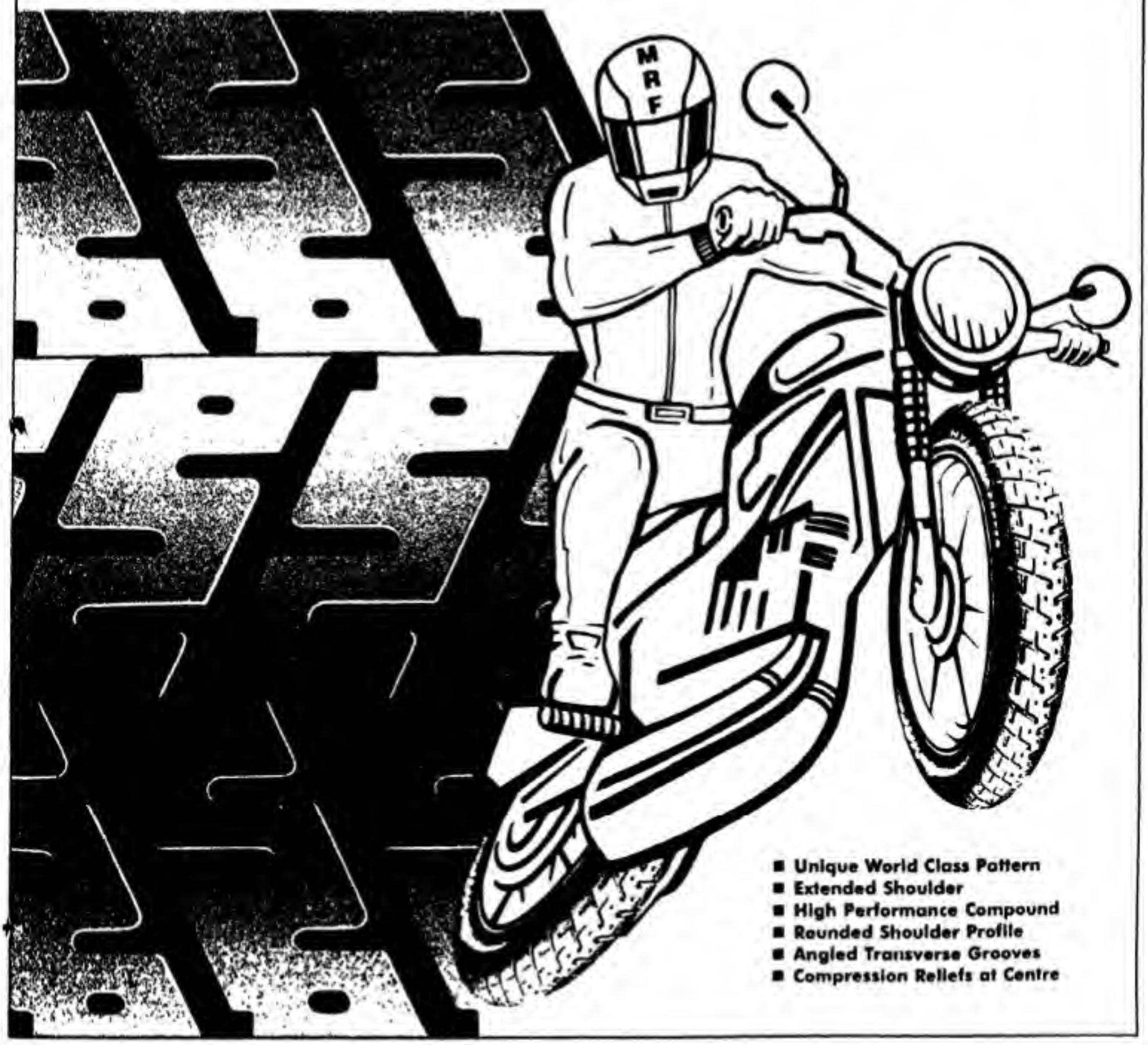

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FATHERS, SONS AND POLITICS

SUNDAY

LALOO YADAV

MULAYAM SINGH

A.B. VAJPAYEE

Before leaving home for campaigning, Mamata Banerjee must see her 'mummy'

The rights of cockroaches is a major election issue in Sivaganga

In Amethi, voters are angry because only some of them have taps with running petrol

In Hassan the election is all about betrayals and betel nuts

'Sambhal kar chalna' is mafia don D.P. Yadav's slogan in Sambhal, because here, people walk with their eyes turned skywards...

These and other wacky stories from the election hinterland

MOST INTERESTING SEATS

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Star watch

Voters flock to see actors and actresses who are adding glamour to electioneering in the south

states.

The states where commentators gave the BJP little hope were: Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal, the north-eastern states (minus Assam, but including Sikkim) and the smaller UTs (barring Chandigarh). In terms of numbers, these states accounted for 175 Lok Sabha seats.

By deduction, it was argued that of the 368 remaining seats from the states where the BJP had significant presence, it would have to hope for a wave-like situation to be anywhere near the 272 mark. A BJP majority was thus considered to be an impossibility by psephologists and analysts alike.

But, by a series of strategic alliances in several states and because of an unrelenting campaign in certain other regions, the BJP has not only made inroads in states hitherto considered 'impossible' for the party, but it has even emerged as the principal political pole in some other far-flung regions.

Consider the following:

■ The BJP has emerged as the principal challenger to the Congress. In Andaman and Nicobar Islands, its candidate lost by a margin of 544. In Manipur (Outer), the BJP lost by a margin of less than 2,500 votes.

■ As the BJP juggernaut rolled in several states, it made major dents in many newer areas. This included the seats in Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Daman and Diu and even Goa where the BJP pushed the regional parties to the third position. While in Tamil Nadu, it is difficult to say at this stage whether the growth of the BJP was solely on account of allying with the AIADMK or not, in Karnataka its growth since 1991 continues unabated and its alliance with Lok Shakti merely ensured further consolidation of its vote-bank.

■ An interesting feature of the 1998 election is the margin of victories for the BJP. Of the total of 141 seats (not including allies), where the BJP candidates came second (including Rajasthan and Maharashtra), the margin of defeat was less than 10,000 votes in as many as 23 constituencies.. In contrast, only 12 BJP candidates won by a margin of less than 10,000. The trend is spread all over the country and while the BJP won the majority of its seats with a comfortable margin, its candidates who lost did not lose by huge margins. This is the main reason behind the fact that while the BJP's share of popular vote went up by a high 5 per cent from the 1996 mark of 20.29 per cent, it could win only 15 seats more.

■ The rise of the BJP's share of the national vote has far reaching political implications. It cannot be considered a

The data pouring into the BJP's central office tells that apart from Maharashtra and Rajasthan, where even the BJP admits there was an anti-saffron wave, the 87 BJP MPs who came second in the polls all contested in areas where opponents were strongest

party which tones out with freak electoral performances despite having a relatively low share of popular vote. The 1998 poll has proved the BJP to be a principal political pole which alongwith its allies has a vote share of more than 35 per cent. The strength of its allies and its future growth will greatly determine future electoral bouts.

■ There has been a consolidation of the BJP vote share and an almost proportional decline of the Congress share (an all-time low of 25.89 per cent). This marks the real spread of the BJP as its share of votes in new areas has gone up sharply. For instance, in Andhra Pradesh, the BJP share was a high 18.28 (up from the 1996 level of 5.65 per cent). In Assam, the BJP's share rose from 15.9 per cent in 1996 to 23.89 per cent this time. Similarly, in West Bengal, the BJP increased its share from the 1996 level of 6.9 per cent to 10.27 in 1998. This share coupled with Trinamul Congress' share of 23.71 per cent was the prinie reasons for the dismal performance of the Congress despite the party polling 15.21 per cent of popular vote.

■ The BJP and its allies were largely prevented from attaining a clear majority becaue of its dismal performance in Maharashtra and Rajasthan besides a last minute surge in Bihar that saw Laloo Prasad Yadav managing to hold on to his stronghold in north Bihar. However, the electoral data from Rajasthan suggests that the state is on the way to becoming—or has already — the Kerala of north India. Where a bipolar polity has become so strongly embedded that a minor swing of popular vote brings large shifts in the number of seats held by the two parties. Though the BJP polled 41.65 per cent of votes this time, the BJP could only win seven seats from Rajasthan, down from the half - way mark of 12 that it shared with the Congress in 1996. The Congress wrested five seats from the BJP by polling barely three per cent more votes.

■ One of the most crucial issues in the past decade has been the mandalisation of the BJP. This has been done primarily through the Ayodhya campaign by providing backward and other lower caste groups among Hindus a sense of commonness with upper castes. It resulted in growing support for the BJP among both the OBCs and Dalits. In successive elections after the watershed 1989 poll when the BJP registered its most dramatic growth (from 2 to 39), the BJP has seen its support base among the deprived sections of Hindu society growing at a fast pace.

One important yardstick to judge the growth of the BJP among the OBCs and Dalits has been the party's position in the 120 reserved constituencies. Though barring a handful, none of these constituencies are dominated either by the tribal or Scheduled Caste voters, the performance of various parties in these seats have immense symbolic value.

Over the past few years, the BJP has performed consistently well in the reserved seats. However, the most significant strides were made by the party in the years after the 1991 poll and in 1996, the BJP sprang a surprise by winning 41 reserved seats as compared to the Congress share of 36. Of the 41 seats that the BJP won, the BJP won as many as 11 seats reserved for tribals. This naturally raised eyebrows because a party with an avowed Hindutva position was making inroads in constituencies dominated by tribals who have been coopted into

According to BJP general secretary K.N. Govindacharya: "There is no question of replacing the Congress, we shall be the next Congress"

BJP's performance in SC & ST seats

	Seats		Vote share (%)	
	1996	1998	1996	1998
Scheduled Castes	30	28	14.41	21.1
Scheduled Tribes	11	14	19.0	25.3

Besides Rajasthan and Maharashtra, BJP came 2nd in 87 seats. Lost 21 seats by margin of less than 10,000 votes.

Graphic by Niranjan Maity

Hindu society at the behest of the BJP.

Coupled with the growth of the BJP in the reserved constituencies the decline of the Congress in its traditional bastion was also seen as a significant development. However, if anybody felt that the 1996 results in the reserved constituencies were an aberration, then the 1998 results demonstrate that what was considered to be straw in the wind, is a definite trend and needs to be addressed by all analysts.

■ In the recent elections, the BJP has maintained its base among the reserved seats. Of the 42 seats that the BJP has won this time, the outfit has increased its tally in the ST category though there has been a slight fall in its share of SC seats. But, among major parties, the BJP continues to have the largest share of reserved seats. What makes this growth significant is that the final tally does not include the seats won by its allies.

Moreover, the BJP growth in the reserved constituencies is accompanied by the decline of the Congress in these areas. Compared to the 36 reserved constituencies that the Congress won in 1996, its share has come down to 30

Backward class voters: favouring the BJP

even though there were reports of last minute swing in tribal support for the party on account of the Sonia blitzkrieg. The BJP's ascendence in the reserved constituencies in general, and specifically its increased acceptance among the Scheduled Castes and Tribals is an issue which social scientists probably have to dwell on in the coming months.

It is thus clear that the BJP has spread far and wide in India and has made inroads into areas which were considered impregnable for the party. Looking at the results in pure arithmatic terms, the BJP won 176 seats (of whom more than 30 are first-time winners) and emerged runner-up in 141. The figure totals upto 317 and with its present allies, the number goes well beyond 400. The BJP has grown this far despite sceptics discounting the possibility of its rise to power. Based on the results of the 1998 poll, the BJP simply has to learn governance in a coalition framework to cement its hold over the nation. •

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay

A SETTLEMENT IN SIGHT?

The BJP is considering a solution to the Ayodhya issue which involves a mandir, *a* masjid *and a monument to freedom fighter Mangal Pandey: all on the disputed site*

It was perhaps only to be expected that in an election largely dramatised by television, the first attempt to stir the hornet's nest should have been done on the idiot box even as the nation remained glued to various 'channel options' and the results poured in. Moreover, given the fact that Indian politics is greatly dominated by mavericks, this one controversy could not have been raked by anyone less than the chief conjurer of disputes: Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray.

In the course of the campaign, Thackeray had stated on several occasions that he was in favour of a national monument in Ayodhya. Thackeray's statement was apparently the result of months of lobbying by Samata Party chief, George Fernandes.

Coming from the man who claimed the responsibility for the demolition of the Babri Masjid in the first place, Thackeray's assertions came in for considerable comment — both within the media and among BJP leaders who were quick to add that the views were his per-

The make-shift Ram Mandir in Ayodhya: contentious issue

sonal views. Very little thought was given to Thackeray's views as it was thought to be a gimmick, tossed in the middle of a general election with the intention of attempting to stop the rout of the Shiv Sena-BJP combine.

However, matters became more serious when on 4 March, the third day of the election result, Thackeray told a TV anchor from the studio in Bombay that he stood by his statement calling for a national monument atop the Ram Temple at Ayodhya. He said he was in favour of building both a temple and a mosque at the disputed site. He further added that he also wanted a national monument dedicated to the freedom fighter Mangal Pandey at the same spot. This would satisfy the aspirations of all sections of society: devout Hindus and Muslims and the atheist/agnostic groups.

On the face of it, Thackeray's comments appeared to be politically correct because the BJP-led coalition could not have a better agenda to begin its tenure than seeking a national reconciliation on Ayodhya. There are no doubts that a quick resolution of the vexed dispute would earn kudos for the Vajpayee government and at the same time take away a major line of attack from its adversaries like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav.

A senior BJP leader who did not wish to be named also argued that any reconciliation over Ayodhya would also elevate the international reputation of the government and would help India in its claim for a permanent slot in the UN Security Council. Islamic countries who are particularly wary of India after the installation of a BJP-led government would naturally respond to the gesture over Ayodhya, the leader contended.

Sensing that the situation for a peaceful and negotiated resolution to the Ayodhya dispute has not been so condusive for years — in fact, never after the agitation was given a mass character by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in 1989 with the Shila Pujan programme, a small group of concerned citizens made cautious moves and contacted politicians of various parties to try bring about a negotiated resolution. The group of intellectuals drawn from a broad ideological spectrum, are basically trying to bring about a rapprochement with a fresh perspective where the take-off point is that Ayodhya has seen too much of hawkish postures, now is the time for a rational debate.

The group of intellectuals spearheading the talks are calling themselves Indians for National Reconciliation and also includes Imtiaz Ahmed, convenor Muslims Intelligentsia Meet. Others in the group who are playing a leading role include Swami Agnivesh; former member National Commission for Backward Classes, D L Sheth; former Planning Commission member Rajni Kothari; veteran Sarvodaya leader Sidhraj Dhadhdha; eminent social scientist Ashish Nandy senior journalist Prabhash Joshi, television anchorperson Rahul Dev; eminent writer Asghar Wajahat; Anand Kumar of JNU and Vijay Pratap of Lokayan, the Delhi-based activists networking organisation.

Given the controversial nature of the Ayodhya imbroglio, efforts have been low key so far and contacts have been established with leaders of various parties at a personal level. It is apparent that any resolution of the dispute cannot be arrived at in an aggressive manner. Rather, steps have to be taken gingerly and the BJP will have to be given some time to settle in office. This, however, is a result of rethinking on the part of the group as when the talks were initiated, an attempt was made to reach the settlement before government formation.

Among the leaders who have been contacted for a discussion on Ayodhya, Jaswant Singh, the chairman of the Manifesto Committee of the BJP, was the only leader who said that he was unable to comment on the merits of the suggestions as he was bound by the manifesto of the BJP which he helped draft.

Atal Behari Vajpayee: caught in the crossfire

However, he is learnt to have said that a resolution of the Ayodhya dispute would definitely be advantageous to the BJP.

But, behind Jaswant Singh's assertion is also the dilemma among the saner elements within the BJP who recognise the fact that the 1998 verdict is also a vote against hard-nosed policies of the BJP. This is best highlighted by the defeat of key players on Ayodhya: Vinay Katiyar — the Bajrang Dal leader from Faizabad and Pramod Mahajan — architect of the first Rath Yatra of L.K. Advani.

Softliners within the BJP know that in the era of coalition politics, any hard position would find few takers. However, they are unsure of the extent to which the hardliners are willing to compromise. They are also perplexed

In the course of election campaign, Bal Thackeray's statement in TV that he was in favour of a national monument in Ayodhya came in for considerable comment — both within the media and among the BJP leaders

over Thackeray's decision to take the head on the issue virtually in a *suo motu* style.

It is not that there are sceptics only within the BJP ranks. A.B. Bardhan, CPI general secretary, has stated that he cannot believe that the debate over a national reconciliation on Ayodhya should have been sparked off by Thackeray. However, after saying that, he is quick to add that if Thackeray remains consistent in his views then the process should be welcomed because a suggestion for a negotiated settlement is finally coming from one of the BJP allies if not from the party itself.

Though the Congress is beset with its own problems, its leaders are also open to a dialogue. Both Ambika Soni and Salman Khurshid who have been contacted by the intellectuals have welcomed the initiative resulting from Thackeray's statement. But while Soni is more guarded saying that she will raise the issue with the party leadership; Khurshid is more forthright and refers to the past positions of the Congress to say that the party has always been committed to a negotiated resolution of the conflict.

However, barring Thackeray, the allies of the BJP who are known for their soft stance on Ayodhya are peculiarly silent on the issue. This is particularly intriguing as Thackeray has stated that Fernandes was largely responsible for the rethink on his part. Even R.K. Hegde has been rather subdued over the issue and this probably reflects the anxiety of the BJP allies not to queer their bargaining power while jockeying portfolios, by raising uncomfortable questions at this stage.

The BJP could not have been better placed on the issue as the issue of restoration of the proposed shrines is not being raised for the moment which is being interpreted in BJP circle as an acceptance of its *mandir waheen banayenge* stand. Sources in the BJP also say that resolving Ayodhya was not on the priority list of the party as it first wants to log some points on the good governance agenda.

One senior BJP leader conceded that Thackeray's statement was ill-timed and there was little need to emphasise and firing the issue out in the open as this is one ammunition that the Opposition would love to use against the BJP. The temple issue is clearly one over which there are sharp differences even within the Sangh Parivar. Vijay Pratap also says that the group which is trying to bring about a negotiated settlement knows that any decision within the RSS clan especially on Ayodhya "cannot be achieved overnight as there are a string of organisations that have to be involved in the discussions."

BJP leaders are also questioning the formula suggested by Thackeray on two points: who can be counted to voice the official position on behalf of the Muslims and why should there be a national monument to commemorate Mangal Pandey when his connections were with Faizabad where there is already an earmarked space for a memorial. It is thus clear that despite pressure being mounted on it, the BJP is not very keen to yield on the temple issue. The party is keen to toe the hard line of VHP regarding the location of nothing but a temple within the *parikrama* area in Ayodhya. The mosque is welcome but outside the limits of the 'holy area'.

There clearly are severe limitations in any attempt to begin a dialogue on Ayodhya. It is premature to say whether the independent initiative will yield any positive results. However, the BJP does find itself in a tough spot as the initiative has been taken by one of its allies. The BJP's decision to put the issue on the back burner will expose the doublespeak of the party on the issue. For once, the BJP shall not be in position to claim that it was in favour of a negotiated settlement which its adversaries did not wish. One round, at least on paper, appears to be going against the BJP over the Ayodhya issue. •

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay/New Delhi

REST IN PIECES

Understanding the disintegration of the United Front

The news of the rout came on the hour, every hour. The United Front (UF), which fought the elections on an anti-BJP, anti-Congress plank hoping for a sizeable tally to gain leverage in government formation, ended up as a poor third in most states.

In some, such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Bihar and Assam, the Front has been totally decimated by its opponents. And if despite the political slaughter it still has 100 seats to its credit, it is largely because the Leftists and Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party have held their ground, though not firmly, in West Bengal, Kerala, Tripura and UP. The verdict of the people may have been imprecise on the whole, but there is no ambiguity in its categorical rejection of the United Front as a political force.

The UF's pitiable performance has much to do with its doddering 18-month rule at the Centre, the political chicanery of its leaders, and the incumbency disadvantage suffered by many of its constituents ruling different states.

The biggest surprise and, therefore, the hardest blow came from Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu, who staged an amazing comeback to trounce the ruling DMK-TMC (Tamil Maanila Congress) combine. In Karnataka, Ramakrishna Hegde's Lok Shakti, in alliance with the BJP, has driven all but the last nail into the Dal's coffin. In Andhra Pradesh, UF convenor Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party

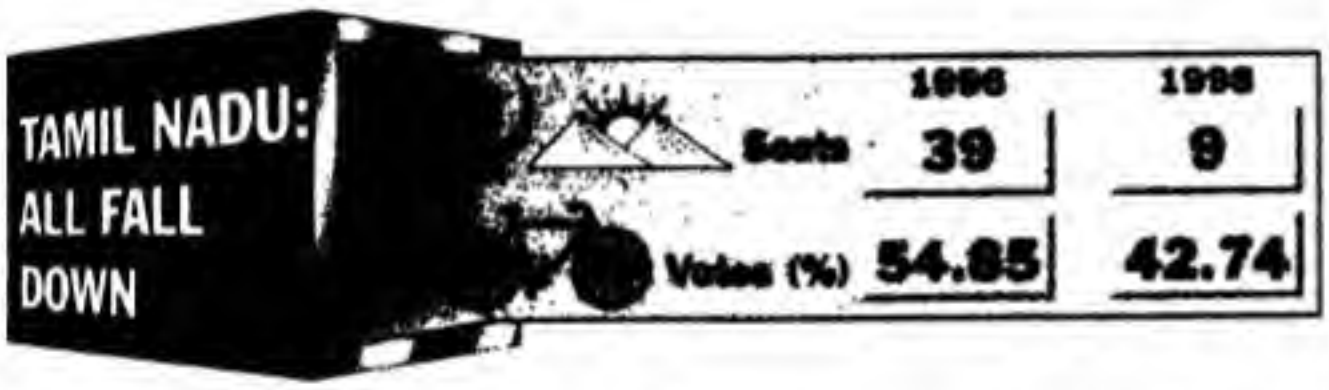
returned with reduced numbers.

In UP and Bihar, the Dal has virtually withered away. In UP, it had even failed to strike an electoral deal with its Front partner, the Samajwadi Party, which went out of its way for a tie-up with the Congress in Maharashtra. It is a measure of the Dal leaders' political acumen that the party has managed to win just six seats countrywide.

Up in the north-east, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), another vocal Front constituent, has drawn a blank, aggravating the Front's decline.

Half the UF's 100 MPs are from the Left. Together, the Leftist bloc has won 48 seats, but even this tally is a climb down from its previous 53. While in West Bengal the Left Front has failed to increase its number of seats, it has literally disappeared in neighbouring Bihar.

In the next few pages, we look at some of the states where the UF got a drubbing.



Jayalalitha has done it again. Thrown out of power by Tamil Nadu's electorate barely two years ago, the "comeback queen" has bounced right back in the Lok Sabha elections. Jayalalitha's AIADMK and its allies — BJP, PMK, MDMK, Subramaniam Swamy's Janata Party and Vazhapadi Ramamurthy's Tamizhaga Rajiv Congress — won 30 out of the 39 parliamentary seats from the state. The AIADMK alone bagged 18 seats. And the DMK-TMC combine, which had made a clean sweep in 1996, has managed to cling on to just eight constituencies this time. The CPI bagged one seat to take the United Front tally to nine.

The single-most important factor which swung the votes in favour of the AIADMK-BJP combine were the ghastly bomb blasts in Coimbatore which killed 60 people — mainly Hindus. Following the blasts, there was a silent wave against the ruling DMK-TMC alliance which was perceived to be "soft" towards Muslim fundamentalists held responsible for the blasts.

Throughout the poll campaign, the AIADMK-BJP combine had been shouting itself hoarse about how the "Karunanidhi regime was encouraging Muslim fundamentalists, creating a bomb culture in the state". A week before the Coimbatore blasts, a huge bomb-making factory was unearthed at Thanjavur and some Muslim extremists were arrested. The BJP and its allies warned that this was all part of an elaborate plot to assassinate L.K. Advani.

While Coimbatore sat on a powder-keg, S.A. Basha, leader of the notorious Al-Umma, believed to be behind the blasts, was mingling freely with the media in his Madras office and blaming "Hindu fundamentalist organisations" for the Coimbatore riots and the growing communalism in Tamil Nadu. Basha was also full of praise for chief minister M. Karunanidhi while blasting the state police.

A poster of Karunanidhi (right); Moopanar (below): loss of face

Basha's candid talk and his arrest after the Coimbatore blasts convinced people that Karunanidhi and the DMK were responsible for the growth of Al-Umma and other Muslim fundamentalist organisations. Karunanidhi also antagonised many by ridiculing the Hindu religion at some election rallies.

"The Coimbatore blasts and the way Karunanidhi and the DMK tried to play down the involvement of Muslim fundamentalists, went a long way in the voters' turnaround," confesses S. Balakrishnan, TMC leader in the state Assembly.

But immediately after the blasts — a day before the first round of polling — the DMK-TMC leaders had tried to brush off the electoral impact. No real damage-control exercise was undertaken before the second round of elections which involved the bulk of the seats. Clearly, Karunanidhi and Moopanar erred in assessing the Coimbatore factor. They were, probably, foxed by the *Frontline* opinion poll which stated: "The voting intention of 79.07 per cent of the voters had not changed after the Coimbatore blast."

But now, the results are there for all to see. "The serial bomb blasts in Coimbatore were the prime cause for the drubbing of the DMK-TMC combine," admits former Union finance minister P. Chidambaram. And TMC president G.K. Moopanar has also confessed that the Coimbatore blasts created a sympathy wave in favour of the BJP.

THE PROMISE of a stable government, identified with the AIADMK's national ally, the BJP, also seems to have influenced the Tamil electorate. The BJP was able to project Atal Behari Vajpayee as the next PM, something which the DMK-TMC could not.

This invariably led to a sizeable amount of cross-voting, hitting the DMK-TMC combine hard. Elections in the past have shown that the state has always voted for "stability". This time around, the Vajpayee-led, Jayalalitha-backed BJP was able to fill the stability slot.

Moreover, this was the first Lok Sabha election since Independence in which the Congress in Tamil Nadu had absolutely no chance of winning. That the United Front would emerge a poor third in the 12th Lok Sabha was a foregone conclusion. So, the BJP-AIADMK proved the right central-regional choice.

The run-up to the polls also saw the anti-Karunanidhi forces rallying around Jayalalitha. This included PMK chief Dr Ramdoss, MDMK leader V. Gopalasamy, Subramaniam Swamy and Vazhapadi Ramamurthy. With Jayalalitha giving her local allies the seats they wanted, there was no split in the Opposition votes.

The caste clashes in southern Tamil Nadu also left deep scars among the Thevar and Dalit communities which form the bulk of the electorate in the south. The Thevars backed the AIADMK.

The Dalits too did not vote for the DMK as they gravitated towards the militant group of the Devendra Kula Vellalar Federation and its new outfit Puthiya Tamizhagam (PT) led by K. Krishnasamy.

ALL THIS lends credence to the allegation that G.K. Moopanar's refusal to accommodate small but powerful parties like the CPI(M), PT and Thirunavukkarasu's rebel ADMK, cost the combine dear. These parties have their own pockets of influence. In Madurai, for example, from where Subramaniam Swamy defeated the sitting TMC MP Ram Babu by a margin of 21,000 votes, the CPI(M) polled over 1,10,000 votes. Though Karunanidhi was willing to let CPI(M) fight this seat, Moopanar had refused. Also, some senior TMC leaders had warned Moopanar not to give tickets to "unpopular" Union ministers like D. Adithyan, M. Arunachalam and S.R. Balasubramanian. But the "arrogant" Moopanar insisted on doing things his way.

With elections '98, the curtains also came down on the cine blitz in Tamil Nadu politics. The Rajnikanth factor faded into oblivion as the actor's last-minute appeal to his fans to support the DMK-TMC combine backfired. The Tamil tinsel town's number-two hero and DMK star campaigner Sharat Kumar lost the Thirunelveli seat.

The poll results are likely to have a sobering effect on Karunanidhi who has now accepted the fact that "Muslim fundamentalists were behind the Coimbatore blasts". He is also likely to tone down the slander campaign against his enemy number one: Jayalalitha.

While campaigning for the Lok Sabha polls, Karunanidhi made the mistake of flogging a dead horse: the corruption charges against Jayalalitha. To counter Karunanidhi's charges, Jayalalitha — campaigning in the rural areas where price rise is a major issue — came up with her famous punch line: "You can buy gold, but you can't buy onions." This worked wonders and Jayalalitha ended up having the last word and the last laugh.

But what about the numerous opinion polls that went so hopelessly wrong about Tamil Nadu? PMK chief Dr Ramdoss puts things into perspective: "This is a victory of the people's judgement over the mumbo-jumbo of poll surveys." •

Sreedhar Pillai/Madras

RCORP NEWS

Jayalalitha: the 'comeback queen' has done it again

KARNATAKA: DAL IN DANGER

	1996	1998
Seats	16	3
Votes (%)	34.90	21.94

Deve Gowda and Sons Pvt Ltd. A powerful and lucrative family enterprise this, which has treated Karnataka and the Janata Dal like a personal fiefdom for the last three years. Today, at its doorstep lie the remains of the Dal.

"People had begun to feel that only Gowda's family had benefited through his leadership and that his sons were riding roughshod over the partymen," confesses a close confidant of the former Prime Minister. "We failed to counter these charges. Other factors added to this and we took a drubbing."

And what a drubbing it was. For once, the statistics say it all. The Dal's tally plummeted from 16 in the '96 elections to just three in '98. Its vote count fell from around 35 per cent to just about 22 per cent.

While Deve Gowda himself managed to win the Hassan hustings by the not-so-flattering margin of about 31,000 votes, his son H.D. Kumaraswamy was humbled in Kanakapura, where he finished a poor third and just about managed to hold on to his deposit.

Adding insult to injury is the desertion of the powerfulandhitherto-faithful Vokkaliga community, which had propelled Gowda towards the chief ministership and then on to prime ministership. Of the eight Vokkaliga candidates fielded by the Dal, only two won: Gowda himself and film star Ambareesh. "The community realised that both the Dal's and Gowda's chances of heading a government were remote," admits the source close to Gowda. "And they did not vote collectively for him or his candidates."

KARNATAKA has demonstrated, once again, the dominant roles played by comrades-turned-competitors — Deve Gowda and Ramakrishna Hegde. However disdainfully Hegde might dismiss Gowda as "a local leader" or Gowda might taunt Hegde as "a paper tiger", the two remain the strongmen of Karnataka politics.

How Hegde might have fared had he

Deve Gowda (right); CM J.H. Patel with deputy CM Siddaramaiah (above): so long, farewell...

For Deve Gowda, who had really turned it on in the name of 'Kannadiga pride' and promised his people that he would rise like the Phoenix to become PM, the Dal's debacle in his home state has been a bad blow.

gone it alone and not entered into an electoral alliance with the BJP will remain a hypothetical question. For now, an analysis of the vote-share reveals that though the Lok Shakti won only three of the ten seats it contested, the former Dal leader did manage to swing votes in favour of buddy BJP, helping it to win 13 seats.

Ramakrishna Hegde has always enjoyed the support of the other dominant community in the state, the Lingayats. His presence and popularity virtually wiped out the Dal in the northern regions of the state, where the Lingayats dominate.

The Lok Shakti, which garnered a remarkable nine per cent of votes in its first serious electoral battle, damaged the Dal's chances in various other constituencies by splitting the votes and pushing the party to the third position. This helped the Congress, which raised its vote share from 33.3 per cent to 38.5 per cent and bagged nine seats. "We were banking on the Sonia factor and the anti-Dal votes," confesses Congress spokeman B.A. Hasanabba. "We never thought the anti-Dal votes would go the BJP way. There are two reasons for this: first, we did not take the BJP very seriously in the state; secondly, we didn't think the Hegde factor could be so strong."

Ramakrishna Hegde's presence and popularity wiped out the Janata Dal in the northern regions of Karnataka, where Lingayats dominate

"Now we are regretting not having tied up with Hegde," adds state Congress leader H.K. Patil. "We would have done far better if we had not pushed him towards the BJP."

YET, EVEN in defeat, the Janata Dal is loathe to admit that Gowda's bete noire Hegde was instrumental in the Dal's downfall. State Dal president B.L. Shankar, who tasted defeat at Chikmagalur, scoffs: "The Hegde factor did not help the BJP's victories. If anything, the BJP helped Hegde's Lok Shakti notch three wins."

So, what explained the Dal's poor showing? Shankar rattles off a long list of lamentations: the pre-poll 'crossover' of nine MLAs from the Dal to the Lok Shakti, the Vajpayee-as-PM wave, the stability plank of the BJP, the Sonia factor, the loss of the minority votes..."And then, there was the incumbency syndrome which really worked against us," rues the state Dal chief.

Also, the BJP managed to sway the youth of Karnataka. "There are a large number of voters in the 18-to-25 age group," says Shankar. "We did nothing to attract this segment."

Those, of course, were the external factors. What of the internal malfunctioning? Resentment against Gowda and Sons (H.D. Revanna and Kumaraswamy) is rising within the Dal. And there are many whose loyalties still lie with Hegde. "In at least six constituencies, our own leaders and partymen who dislike Gowda and his sons, and those who are still loyal to Hegde, worked against the party and ensured its defeat," points out a Dal leader.

The abject failure of the Dal is bound to affect the Patel government. "The government will change," predicts a Lok Shakti leader. "For that, we don't need to inflict a fresh election on the people. All we need to do is to get some people over, change the name-board and have a new government."

"Ever since counting began and the trends became clear," he says, "we have been inundated with phone calls from Dal MLAs who want to switch over to our side. Other than a hardcore group of 28 Gowda supporters, we are confident of getting the support of a majority of them. And along with the BJP, it will not be difficult to form a government. The only question which remains is 'when' we will do it." But for now, a defiant Dal is confident that 'permutations and combinations' will help the Patel government survive.

V RAJAGOPAL

However, the Janata Dal is no longer leaving things to chance. To make sure that the party does not lose more ground, Gowda and Co. are now planning an "apology tour" of the state.

"Deve Gowda, chief minister Patel, deputy chief minister Siddaramaiah and senior leaders like P.G.R. Sindhia will soon begin the tour," says a Dal leader. "We want to go to the people, highlight our achievements, and tell them that they need not have given the Dal such an adverse verdict. But basically, it is time for some introspection." •

Gauri Lankesh/Bangalore

BIHAR: DAL BADAL

	1998	1996
Seats	22	1
Votes (%)	31.80	9.40

"RJD *ka matlab hai, Real Janata Dal.*" That's what Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) president Laloo Prasad Yadav has been reiterating for months. And now, after the battle for Bihar has been won and lost, no one seems to be disputing this fact, at least not in Lalooland.

For all the hype about this being the ultimate Yadav (Laloo) vs Yadav (Sharad) showdown, the RJD vs JD tussle turned out to be a no-contest. In 1996, the Janata Dal had contested 44 out of the total 54 seats, and won 22. This time, the Dal ended up with a solitary seat: former Union railway minister Ram Vilas Paswan's Hajipur.

While on paper, this reads like the most dramatic of Dal debacles in these elections, a closer look reveals a slightly different picture. The fact is that the Dal's tally had effectively dropped from 22 to six, long before elections to the 12th Lok Sabha became a reality.

In July '97, Laloo broke away from the Dal to float the RJD. In the cross-over that ensued, the then Bihar CM took with him 16 of the 22 'Dal' MPs. The RJD men simply hijacked the old JD office at Veer Chand Patel Path in the heart of Patna. The hoarding, too, was not changed — the word 'Rashtriya' was prefixed, the *'chakra'* was wiped out and replaced with a *'laltein'*. So, in Bihar at least, Sharad Yadav was left with the presidentship of a bleak house. And the Bihar blackout that followed came as no real surprise.

Only Ram Vilas Paswan managed to emerge with his reputation as a Dalit draw intact. Paswan was helped by the fact that the Samata Party did not field a candidate from Hajipur. Some polarisation among the Muslims also worked in the Dal leader's favour. The EC's strict vigil over Hajipur played a part, as did Paswan's redoubtable money power.

Paswan apart, Dal candidates throughout Bihar were reduced to playing the role of *vote-katwa* (vote-slashers). Its alliance with the Left amounted to nothing as the CPI/CPI(M) contested 13 seats but failed to make a mark. The Dal was severely handicapped by the lack of crowd-pullers in its ranks; its failure to address local issues seriously; and its inability to sell a concrete "central dream". But Ganesh Yadav, leader of the JDLP, is adamant: "We were not beaten by the ballot. We were beaten by a corrupt administration, rigging and lax poll observers."

PRADIP SANYAL

Laloo Prasad Yadav with a giant lantern: light and shade

If the Dal challenge fell flat, the RJD, too, failed to take a giant leap. Laloo did win the Madhepura *mahasangram* against Sharad quite comfortably in the end, but his party won just 17 out of the 35 seats it contested. The RJD retained seven, lost nine, and won ten new seats.

Ram Vilas Paswan (left) and Sharad Yadav: united we fall

With the Congress winning five and the RJP one, Laloo's much-touted Jan Morcha ended up with 23.

While Laloo's A-R-M-Y (Adivasi-Rajput-Muslim-Yadav) formula drubbed the Dal, it failed to stop the BJP-Samata juggernaut. The Opposition combine totalled 30 seats, with the BJP winning 19 and the Samata Party 11.

This has, obviously, left Laloo in the lurch. He is trying hard to cobble together a Secular Front at the Centre to keep the BJP at bay. "Laloo is desperate for power and while the Janata Dal had a national standing, the RJD is just confined to Bihar. So he will do all that he can to cling on to power in Bihar," observes Samata leader Nitish Kumar.

The former Bihar CM realises that the BJP-Samata siege has reached his doorstep in Patna. A resurgent Opposition in the state presents a direct threat to the Rabri Devi regime and to Laloo's fate in the fodder scam.

So, if the Lok Sabha election in Bihar has destroyed the Dal, it has also left Laloo fighting with his back to the wall. •

Naved Zahir/Patna

	1996	1998
Seats	4	0
Votes (%)	30.05	4.92

In Orissa, it was the tale of two parties: the rise of the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and the fall of the Janata Dal. Just weeks before the country went to polls, Navin Patnaik split the Janata Dal into two. In the name of the father, of course. He then tied up with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). And the rest, as they say, is electoral history.

At the end of the BJD-BJP combine's dream run, 16 out of the 21 parliamentary seats in Orissa were safely in the newly-formed front's kitty. The 'original' Janata Dal was wiped out. It failed to open its account and its percentage of votes fell from 30.05 in '96 to a shameful 4.92 in '98.

If this wasn't bad enough, all Dal candidates (save Mohan Jena from Jaipur), lost their deposits! Yes, the high and mighty Srikant Jena included. The former Union tourism and parliamentary affairs minister managed to secure just 91,556 votes in Kendrapara, a traditional stronghold of the Dal.

In fact, the one-lakh vote mark proved elusive for the Dal and its allies in most constituencies. Former state minister Chaitanya Prasad Majhi managed just 6,798 in Mayurbhanj; JD youth president Ranendra Pratap Swain bagged 91,556 in Cuttack; Durga Charan Routray totalled 14,287 in Puri; JD-backed CPI(M) leader Shivaji Pattanaik ended up with 17,611 in Bhubaneswar....The roll of dishonour goes on and on, as does the list of digruntled Dal men.

Almost everyone who is anyone in the Janata Dal today is blaming the enemies within rather than those without. State Dal president Ashok Das and fat cat Srikant Jena are, of course, the prime targets. One for "mismanagement"; the other for "high-handedness".

Among the first to dissociate themselves from the Dal hierarchy (admitting "moral responsibility" and expressing "dissatisfaction") were veteran leader Prof. Kalmadi Charan Behera and the outspoken Nimapada MLA Surendra Nath Nayak. The latter quit his post of chairman, state parliamentary board of

(From left) Navin Patnaik, L.K. Advani and A.B. Vajpayee: winners take it all

the Janata Dal, blaming the "wrong management policy" of state president Ashok Das and the "anti-Biju utterances" of Srikant Jena for the Dal's debacle.

"What was Srikant Jena? He was in the streets before Biju Patnaik picked him up and made him a leader....The people of Orissa could not tolerate Mr Jena's anti-Biju Patnaik policy, so they rejected him as well as other Dal candida-

Srikant Jena: villain of the piece

tes," declared Nayak.

Prof. Behera dashed off a two-page letter to Dal president Sharad Yadav, heaping the blame of the party's poor showing on the mismanagement of the state leadership and the behaviour of some of his party colleagues. "Our party leaders...provided nothing for actual electioneering...I am astonished at what happened to our central leaders who never turned up in their respective constituencies where they got defeated also. The same thing also happened to the state leadership in Orissa...I demand that if a complete revamping of the party is not done within a month or so then instead of remaining under a signboard I would prefer to remain alone as a true loyalist of Biju Patnaik..." wrote the "lately appointed" vice-president of the state unit.

Amidst the ruins, president Ashok Das puts up a brave front. "I do not want to comment on who has said what about whom," he told SUNDAY and then went on to explain how the defeat of the Dal in Orissa was "no isolated phenomenon". "The vote was for the Centre and the BJP managed to encash on the anti-establishment votes here," was Das' bathetic reading of a pathetic situation.

At present, the Janata Dal does not even have a leader of its state legislative party. And while the disintegrating Dal gropes for some sense of direction, the BJP-BJD is riding a real high in this coastal state of eastern India. •

Surendra Patra/Bhubaneswar

THE FRONT THAT FAILED

ASSAM: ZERO-SUM GAME

	1996	1998
Seats	5	0
Votes (%)	27.17	19.00*

*Approx

Just as things were beginning to look up for beleaguered Assam chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, comes the shock result in the state's parliamentary polls. Mahanta, after being granted a breather by the Assam Governor in the letter of credit (LoC) scam, was banking on some Lok Sabha seats to give him crucial bargaining power at the Centre.

But that was not to be. The ruling Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) failed to even open its account as the Opposition Congress(I) grabbed ten of the 14 seats in the state. The BJP notched up a significant win, with Kabindra Purakayastha defeating Congress(I) heavyweight and former Union minister Santosh Mohan Dev from Silchar.

The AGP put in its worst-ever poll performance since its inception in 1985. In the '85 general elections, the AGP bagged seven seats; in '91 it just managed to hold on to Nagaon; and in '96 it came from behind to win five seats. But this time, the AGP and its allies failed to even finish second in most constituencies.

Mahanta's misery was complete in Nagaon, the AGP bastion, the CM's home ground. His wife, Jayashree Goswami Mahanta's political debut here ended in disaster as she finished way behind her Congress and BJP rivals. Congressman Nripen Goswami won Nagaon, defeating his BJP rival Rajen Gohain by 65,184 votes.

Among other AGP heavyweights taking a tumble was former Union minister Birendra Prasad Baishya, who finished a poor third in the Mongoldoi Lok Sabha constituency, managing a mere 51,263 votes.

The Congress cashed in on the anti-incumbency syndrome and its tie-up with the United Minority Front (UMF). The UMF made sure that the Muslims voted *en masse* for the Congress. In return, UMF leader A.F. GolamOsmani was given the Barpeta seat.

The Asom Jatia Sanmilan, floated by Mahanta's friend-turned-foe Bhrigu Kumar Phukan, also cut into the AGP's vote-bank.

RAJIB BASU

Prafulla Kumar Mahanta: humiliated at the hustings

But it was the BJP which gained most ground in these elections. BJP candidates finished second in as many as eight constituencies, including AGP power centres like Guwahati, Nagaon and Mongoldoi. That the BJP is making rapid strides in the state is clear from the figures: the party had polled just 9.6 per cent votes during '91 Lok Sabha elections; improved its tally to 15.92 per cent in '96; and has now pushed its vote-share to over 20 per cent. The saffron surge has even reached the Brahmaputra Valley.

Meanwhile, there is trouble in the AGP camp. Several partymen, led by senior leader and party general secretary Atul Bora, have launched a Mahanta-*hatao* campaign. Bora has blamed the chief minister for "wrong selection of candidates", especially for the prestigious Nagaon seat.

But the majority of AGP leaders have stated that the CM and party president was not "solely responsible" for the poor performance. So, any immediate change in party leadership has been ruled out.

Mahanta and his men are blaming the ULFA for the AGP's poll debacle. The outlawed militant outfit had given a call for poll boycott in the state. This, explained the AGP leadership, had kept people away from the booths and caused such a lopsided result. The ruling party has lashed out at both the Centre and the Election Commission for not responding to its repeated requests for additional paramilitary forces during the elections. The AGP leadership has also dismissed reports that a sizeable number of its supporters, who cast their ballots despite the ULFA's boycott call, voted in favour of the BJP.

The humiliation at the hustings has hit Mahanta where it hurts. After being an important member of the United Front steering committee, the Assam CM is now desperate to find a toe-hold at the Centre. But with no MPs in his bag, a hostile Congress demanding President's Rule in Assam, his Left-wing partners growing increasingly critical of his policies, and 'his own people' giving him the thumbs down, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta will need nothing short of a (saffron-tinted) miracle to set things right. •

Dilip Chandan/Guwahati

INFOGRAPHICS: NILRATAN MAITY

Cricket tantrums

ICC should frame rules to protect the game from irresponsible people

Whether it is the history of subjugation or not, the fact is that the three leading "White" cricket playing countries have almost always carped on Indian "shortcomings". Every time an English, South African or Australian team has found the going tough, it has painted a picture of inefficiency and worse.

This may be just an attack to defend failure in the field of play. It could also be a supercilious attitude towards everything Indian. In the case of the Australians currently touring the country, it appears to be a mixture of both.

Predictably, the Australians started with the weather. The humidity, according to them, was so sapping that it was difficult to play. As if the weather all over Australia was akin to that of Switzerland.

Thereafter came the favourite topic — food. Beans could never have been the reason for the frightful bloating of Shane Warne, but he insisted on having loads of it shipped from his home country. According to doctors in India, the quality of Indian beans was at least on a par with — if not superior to — those from Australia. And the visiting team's manager went one better. He insisted that Indian salads were washed "in local water", meaning they were not hygienically cleaned.

This was an affront to the hotel housing the visitors. The management, being polite, merely defended its position saying that the kitchens were clean. Whether or not the manager is a part-time chef in Australia, the fact remains that the hotels in metropolitan cities like Chennai play host to dignitaries and business people far above the manager's station in life. It is only the cricket squad that complains.

Having exhausted the hospitality avenue, some broadcasters indulged in kite-flying while the radio was "live". The conversation? Accusations against a senior Indian player and even an Indian umpire of betting and taking bribes. One will not be surprised if those slandered take these people to court.

The unending pricks designed to put the Indians on the defensive psychologically, continue. The latest is the resurrection of the controversy over Rajesh Chauhan's bowling action. Unable to stomach the thrashing meted out to the self-proclaimed leaders in the game in the first Test at Chennai, the Australian press is now orchestrating a case against the off-spinner.

To the Australians, an International Cricket Council recommendation means nothing. The Board of Control for Cricket in India was very receptive to the doubts about the bowler's action voiced by match referees. It agreed to drop him from the national team and seek advice from the veteran Fred Titmus "to correct his bowling action". It was only after Titmus was satisfied with Chauhan's delivery that the player was re-inducted in the team.

But the Kangaroos keep prancing. While the Chauhan issue is certain to keep the Aussie press humming, another issue has been kept in reserve. The pitches in India will surely come in for detailed scrutiny and drawbacks highlighted.

Unfortunately, the obvious bias extends to match referees as well. Nayan Mongia has been fined half his match fees for contesting an l.b.w. decision. But Fanie de Villiers and Pat Symcox of South Afirca have not faced any flak for racial remarks against children of their own country.

RAJESH KUMAR

Rajesh Chauhan: keeping the Aussie press humming

Every time an English, South African or Australian team finds the going tough, it blames everything but its own performance. It may be just an excuse or contempt for everything Indian

More important, Ricky Ponting's expletives coming through clearly on television after he was adjudged out by Venkatraghavan and Greg Blewett's obscene gesture towards Mongia have been similarly ignored. Match referee Peter van der Merwe is, incidentally, from South Africa.

It is time the ICC framed rules to protect the game from irresponsible people whether they are players, officials or journalists. •

Arijit Sen/Calcutta

Now that Sanjay Dutt and Rhea Pillai have tied the knot — in a romantic ceremony at the Mahalaxmi Temple in Mumbai on Valentine's Day — will Dutt finally settle down to happy domesticity?

Well, that's what he intends to do. In fact, there is some talk that Sanjay may even ask for the custody of his daughter, Trishala, so that she can come to India and live with her father and new stepmother.

The Sharmas (Dutt's in-laws) will, of course, fight this move tooth and nail. And it remains to be seen if Sanjay succeeds in this endeavour.

Talking of weddings, Arjun Rampal and long-time girlfriend, Mehr Jesia, intend to tie the knot some time next month. But this will be a simple, private ceremony, only for close freinds, because both Mehr and Arjun are near-paranoid about preserving their privacy.

These 'close friends' will include those from the fashion and film worlds. But it is a safe assumption that Malini Ramani — the girl whom Rampal ditched — will not feature on the guest list.

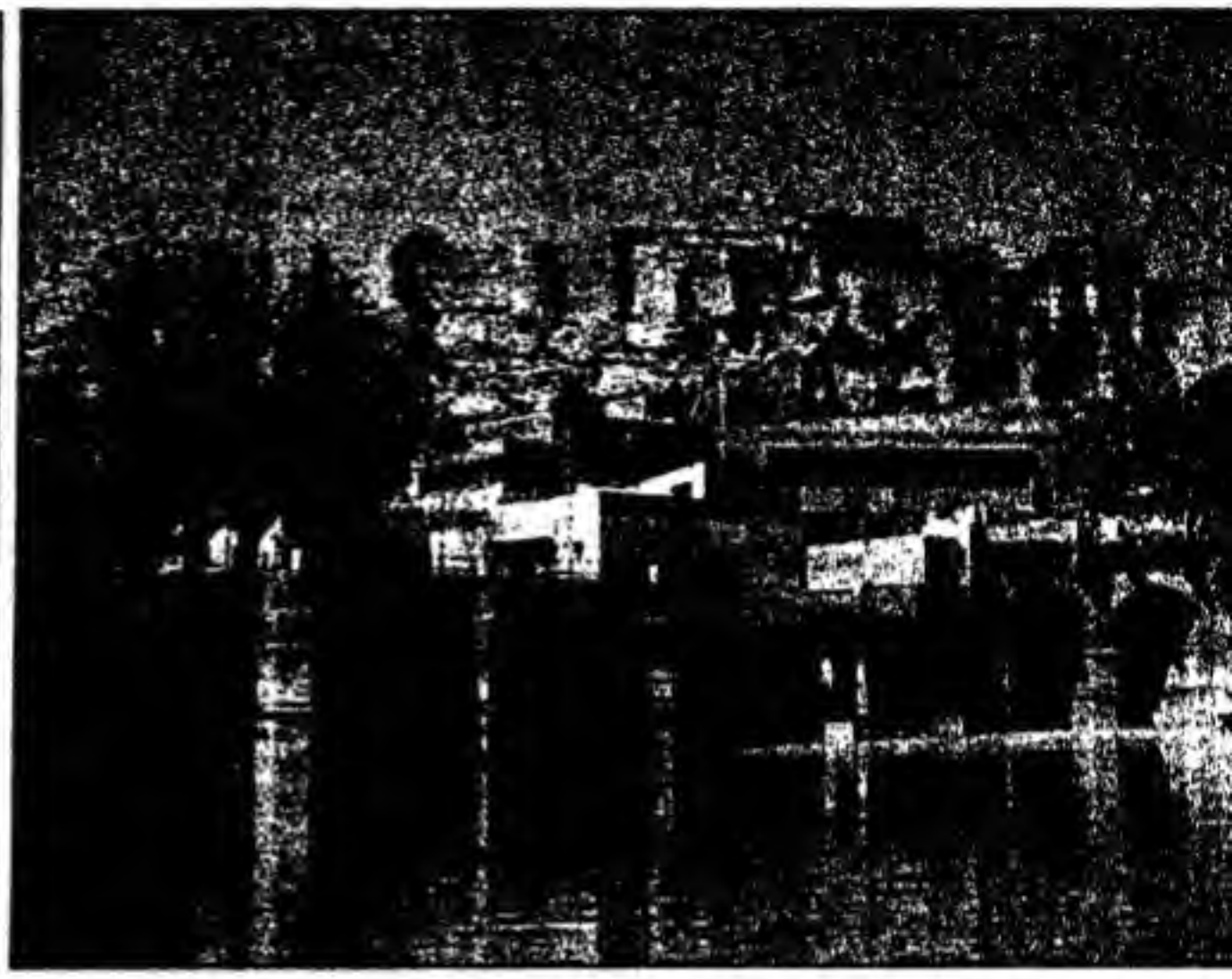
Haircuts are the new obsession in the film world. Both Sunny and Bobby Deol travel abroad for their cuts regularly. And taking the example from them, Dimple Kapadia, has had her hair cut by the celebrity hairdresser, Frederick, of New York. And such was the success of this look that her daughter, Twinkle, followed suit and sheered off her locks.

Result: all the glamour girls of Bollywood are queueing up to get one drastic haircut after another. And the producers are tearing their hair out in trying to retain continuity.

Now that Shah Rukh and Gauri Khan are proud parents of a young boy, Aryamaan, can we hope that dear daddy will finally grow up and act his age? Or will we see a repeat of the recent awards nite during which Shah Rukh lapsed into gobbledeegook in an attempt to communicate with his infant son over the television waves?

Will somebody please, please tell Khan that these displays are just downright embarrassing, rather than endearing? We know how much he loves and adores his son, but, please, for God's sake, can't he do his loving in private? •

Reviewing a travelling exhibition of documentaries on the South Asian experience



Movable feast

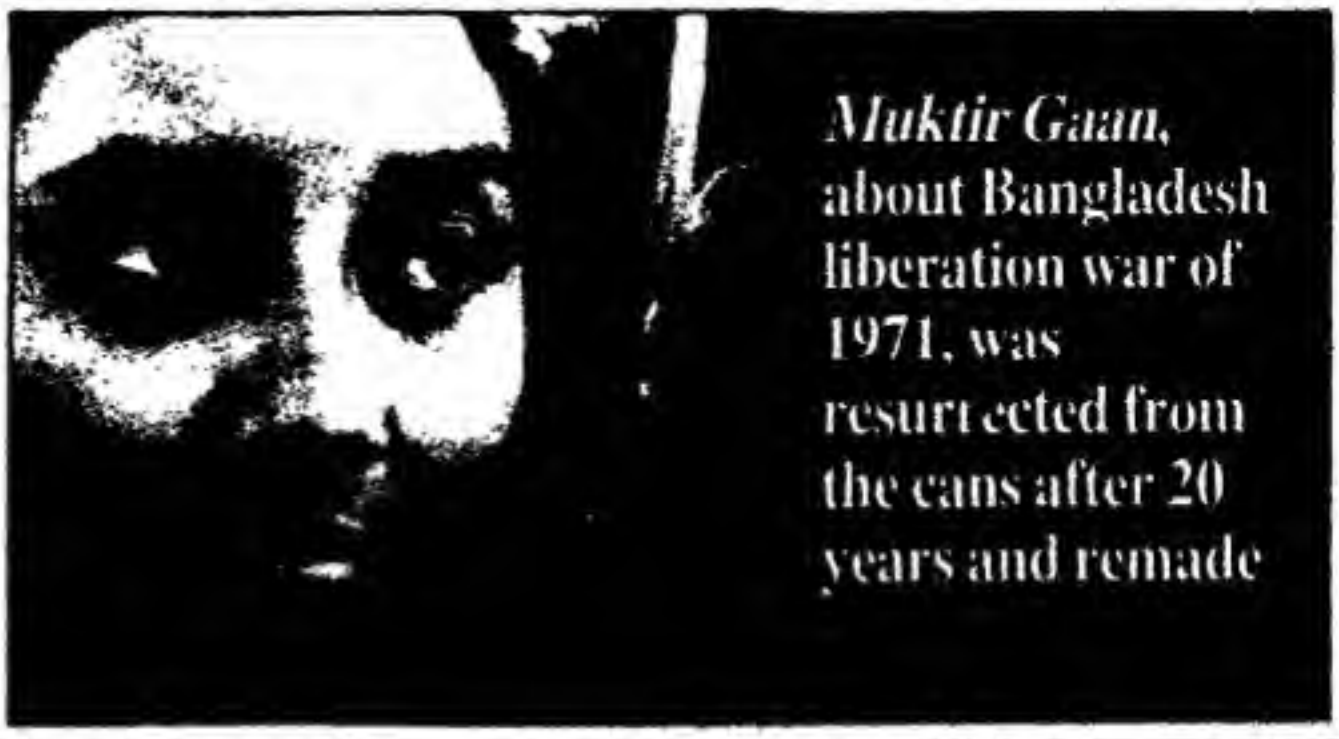
A documentary film-maker's life is a pendulous existence between ulcers and oblivion. He raises the money for a production, shoots and edits the film on a shoe-string budget and then waits with baited breath for an opportunity to show it. It is, thus, strange that the tribe still manages to grow. And, in fact, as a recent festival in New Delhi proved, it is beginning to acquire a recognisable voice not only in India, but all over South Asia.

Early in February, Delhiites got to see 15 documentaries over two days. The exhibition, called Travelling Films South Asia, covered a wide spectrum — a variety of themes related to the subcontinental existence. The festival is slated to travel to all the capitals and major metros of South Asia.

The lone entry from Nepal, *The Spirit Doesn't Come Anymore*, was a winner at the Kathmandu festival of documentaries last year. It is about the Tibetan practice of curing diseases through invocation of spirits. Pao Wangchuk's family has been practising this art for 13 generations but his own son, Karma, cannot cope with the rigours of a healer's life. The film revolves around the interplay of emotions between the father and the son — Wangchuk's disappointment and anger contrasting with Karma's helplessness and frustration with his father's constant badgering. Young director Tsering Rhitar has underlined the contradictions inherent in the main characters. As a dialogue between tradition and modernity, the film stays away from taking sides.

Muktir Gaan (Song of Freedom) by Catherine and Tareque Masud is the story of a troupe of musicians travelling around the war zone during the Bangladesh liberation struggle of 1971. Lear Levin, an American film-maker, had tried to capture the tragedy of the war and the efforts of these musicians to inspire the refugees and the guerrilla cadres. He was, however, unable to raise funds to make the film and the footage lay in the cans in his basement in New York for 20 years. In 1990, the directors got hold of this footage, added other archival material and produced the film in 1995. Had it been made during the war or right afterwards, it could have inspired a battle-scarred nation. One wonders why a quasi-propaganda film was made when Bangladesh had been independent for more than two decades. Now, at best, it can only work up collective nationalist nostalgia.

Achin Pakhi, also from Bangladesh, is a film on the legendary *baul* singer Lalon Fakir. The film uses his songs as the basic narrative for explaining his philosophy and his persona. The cadence and rhythm of *baul*-songs gels beautifully with the majestic surge of the huge



Muktir Gaan, about Bangladesh liberation war of 1971, was resurrected from the cans after 20 years and remade

Marubhumi (above) and *Pastoral Politics* were two good Indian films on environmental issues

Bangladeshi rivers. It is the cloyingly didactic nature of the narration and the long brooding interview chunks which spoil an otherwise interesting film. The music of the *bauls* is supposed to be a medium of communication between God and man. But with so many pundits adding on their two-bits, divinity seemed far, far away.

Mr Jinnah: The Making of Pakistan was the glamour event of the festival. With an impressive list of films shown on BBC, ITV and Channel 4, Christopher Mitchell, the director, has a formidable track record. His treatment of Jinnah the man was well-done, considering that Jinnah's private life has always been an enigma. His evolution as a political heavyweight is carefully juxtaposed with the anti-colonial struggle in India. Jinnah's predicament as a liberal constitutionalist forced by circumstance to assume the mantle of a street-smart agitationist was highlighted.

Technically speaking, it's slick except for the sound recording in some of the interviews. The film, nevertheless, questions the blame Jinnah had to take for tainting Indian politics with a communal colour in the Forties. Maybe we would do well to address a similar question to understand the fundamentalist trends that prevail in our politics today.

Aur Woh Raks Karte Rahi (And She Dances On) by Shireen Pasha is a delightful film about young classical dancer Tehreema Mitha. Her struggle to evolve a style of her own in a conservative Pakistani society (where dance and music are anathemas) has been handled boldly. Some very stylistically shot dance sequences and Tehreema Mitha's articulate enunciation of her beliefs and experiences, made it one of the high points of the festival.

With nine films India had a strong presence in the festival, but not necessarily in terms of quality. *Aan Poove* (Male Flower) by P. Balan and *Dry Days in Dobbagunta* by Nupur Basu were woefully amateurish. The former tried to tell the story of Seethalakshmi's transformation into Sreedharan through sex-change and how it redefined his role in family and society in Kerala. A bold theme marred by inept handling. Similarly, *Dry Days* .., about the anti-liquor movement in Andhra Pradesh, turned out to be more of a news-clip rather than an issue-based documentary.

That strong subjects do not automatically translate themselves into good films was apparent. *Ajit* (The Unconquerable) by Arvind Sinha and *Asghari Bai: Echoes of Silence* by Priti Chandriani and Brahmanand Singh were cases in point. Meera Dewan's much-talked-about *Amrit Beeja* (Eternal Seed), about the conflict between traditional and modern agricultural practices in Karnataka, was a technical masterpiece, thanks to excellent camerawork by Sunny Joseph. But the narration as well as the lyrics were at a quasi-philosophical tangent. Some sub-standard poetry recited at regular intervals added to the verbal onslaught. The only saving graces were the soundbytes in which women reasserted their decision to continue using traditional seeds.

There were two good films on environmental issues — *Pastoral Politics* by Sanjay Barnela and Vasant Sabherwal and *Marubhumi* (The Desert) by Amar Kanwar. The former is about the Gaddis (ship-herds) of Himachal. This nomadic tribe has often been blamed for causing deforestation. The film, very convincingly, refutes this charge and makes a case for the Gaddis. Sanjay Barnela's camerawork is excellent.

Marubhumi centres around the politics of water in Rajasthan, with a special focus on Jodhpur, where the traditional water-harvesting systems are on the decline. Two city old-timers relive the history, underlining the need to revitalise the old systems. Dilip Verma's camerawork enlivens a rather 'dry' locale.

Anand Patwardhan's film *Father, Son and Holy War*, about male insecurity in wartime, was the biggest draw of the festival. The film is a bit too long and the narrative rather loose. The camerawork has been sloppily done. Nonetheless, the film is a landmark because of what it says about the Indian psyche.

The surprise of the festival was Surajit Sarkar and Vani Subramanian's *Meals Ready*. It focuses on the politics of rice growing in South India and the socio-economic factors that influence it. The film explores the conflict inherent in free-market economy as it pushes the small farmer to the sidelines. Hemant Chaturvedi's camerawork is quite expressive and the technical standards fairly high.

The film has been screened at various small towns in South India and apparently inspired a positive and active response. It's time documentaries are exposed to a larger audience, and festivals like these travel to *mufassil* towns and villages. It's time they break free of the incestuous circle of documentary filmmaking and make an impact on the lives of the people they talk about. •

Pallav Das/New Delhi

NEIGHBOURS

Uneasy passage

Bangladesh and Nepal blast India over the closure of a transit route

For all the goodwill visits and vigorous handshakes that mark interactions between members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), there is trouble brewing in the region over a delicate economic matter.

Bangladesh and Nepal have joined hands in criticising India over the closure of a transit route. The route in question allowed Nepal to ship its export-import cargoes from the Mongla Port in Bangladesh, avoiding the busy Calcutta and Haldia ports. The Indo-Nepalese treaty, allowing Kathmandu to use this transit route through Bangladesh, expired on 1 March. And the Indian Border Security Force has hung a notice-board in the Banglabandh border area simply stating that the route is closed since 1 March.

Bangladesh's commerce minister Tofail Ahmed has said that India should grant full economic cooperation to land-locked Nepal. "Bangladesh will discuss the issue at an appropriate forum to make the transit provided through Banglabandh in Bangladesh functional," explained the commerce minister.

According to Tofail Ahmed, a close confidant of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed, India should support Nepal in the true spirit of regional cooperation as propounded by the seven-nation SAARC, of which Bangladesh, India and Nepal are active members.

"If we fail to do anything for Nepal in this regard, the cause of SAARC will be harmed and regional cooperation will suffer," warned Ahmed.

The Indian diplomatic circles in Dhaka insist that the Delhi-Kathmandu agreement was to allow Nepal to bring goods from Kathmandu to the Mongla Port, and not from the port into Nepal. But senior officials of the Bangladesh commerce ministry have rejected Indian claims and stated that the accord was for "two-way traffic" through the transit route.

Meanwhile, the Nepalese ambassador to Bangladesh, Lok

REGIONAL ROW: *I.K. Gujral in Kathmandu (above); Sheikh Hasina with an Indian delegation (left)*

Bahadur Shrestha, has accused India of blocking the smooth trade passage through Banglabandh. Shrestha explained how, under the MoU of 7 June, 1997, India had agreed to an additional transit route to the 15 routes agreed upon under the earlier Indo-Nepalese treaty of 6 December, 1991. So, the closure of the Banglabandh transport route amounts to the violation of the 1991 transit treaty by India, alleged the Nepalese ambassador.

Shrestha has alleged that the customs and other concerned officials of India have always been 'non-cooperative' while implementing the transit arrangement. The Nepalese ambassador has also highlighted some clauses in the MoU that were impeding the goods flow. Due to Indian restrictions, it has been quite impossible for Nepal to use the Banglabandh transit route during the last six months, complained Shrestha.

According to the agreement, goods could only be carried under Indian escort inside Indian territory two days a week (Saturdays and Sundays) during daytime. This restriction discourages Nepalese traders from using the Mongla Port for import and export of goods. Nepal has been asking the Indian authorities to allow six-days-a-week, round-the-clock, to-and-fro transit through Banglabandh. But to no avail.

Lok Bahadur Shrestha revealed that after the signing of the treaty, Nepal had imported only 32,000 metric tonnes of fertiliser from different countries. These could only be unloaded at the Mongla Port but could not be transported into Nepal through Banglabandh. Special permission had to be sought from India to transport the imported fertiliser through Darshana of Bangladesh to Ruxaul of Nepal via India.

The tiny Himalayan kingdom of Nepal had achieved its

FRIENDLY NEIGHBOURHOOD?: *anti-India demonstrations in Kathmandu*

long-cherished dream of an additional transit route through Bangladesh following Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral's visit to Kathmandu from 5 June to 7 June last year. It was then agreed that Nepal would be allowed to use theKakaravitta-Phulbari route, a 50-km. corridor stretching across the Indian "chicken neck" linking Nepal's eastern frontier with the Bangladesh border point of Banglabandh. This breakthrough was widely hailed both in Bangladesh and Nepal as a unique example of regional cooperation.

The new Kakaravita-Phulbari-Banglabandh road link, flagged off on 1 September, 1997, was to allow Nepal to ply container trucks all the way to and from the Mongla Port. So, for the first time, the land-locked Himalayan kingdom had the choice of not depending solely on Indian ports for its overseas trade. And according to a Nepali government report available with the Nepali Embassy in Dhaka, the new truck route would have led to a phenomenal growth (to the extent of 300 per cent to 400 per cent) in Nepal-Bangladesh bilateral trade.

According to Nepali diplomats in Dhaka, the provision of the new truck route could have diverted at least 20 per cent of the export and import cargoes to Mongla Port from the Indian ports of Calcutta and Haldia. While the Indian ports are overcrowded, Mongla is under-utilised.

As far as using the Bangladeshi port for transit was concerned, senior Nepali diplomats admitted, "A lot would depend on the kind of service the Mongla Port in Bangladesh will have to offer to Nepal." The Bangladesh government was quick to allocate an amount of Taka 10 million to improve the infrastructure of the port area. And the Nepalese ambassador, during a recent visit to Mongla Port, expressed satisfaction over the arrangements.

The smooth functioning of this transit route was expected to give a major boost to trade and industrial activity in this South Asian region. So now, Bangladesh and Nepal are blaming India for queering their path to progress. •

Rahman Jahangir/Dhaka

TRIPURA

No problem

The Left Front retains its hold over the state

The ruling Left Front in Tripura has returned to power for a second consecutive term with a comfortable two-third-plus majority in the 60-member state Assembly.

Out of the 41 seats bagged by the Left Front, the CPI(M) secured 38, while the two other constituents, the CPI and the RSP, won one and two seats respectively. The Opposition Congress-Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS)-Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) combine bagged 18 seats out of which the Congress secured 13, the TUJS four, and the TNV one. A dissident Congress candidate fought and won the Kalyanpur seat as an Independent. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which contested all the 60 seats, could not open its account.

For the Congress, the result was a mixed bag. It secured 13 seats (three more than the last time) — seven from the Sadar sub-division, one each from Sonamura, Amarpur, Udaipur and Kailashahar sub-divisions and two from the Bishalgarh sub-division. The Congress was, however, routed in the three sub-divisions of South Tripura, Belonia, Sabroom and Kanchanpur. The Congress camp suffered a setback when former chief minister and Rajya Sabha MP Sudhir Ranjan Majumdar was beaten by CPI(M) nominee Pabitra Kar at Khayerpur. But Samir Ranjan Burman, former CM and leader of the Opposition, and his son Sudip won comfortably.

The TNV, an insurgent group turned political party, made its first entry into the state Assembly. TNV supremo Bijoy Kumar Hrankhawl trounced his nearest CPI(M) rival Gitta Reang by a hefty margin. The TUJS, a tribal-based party which won only one out of the 20 tribal reserved seats last time, contested ten seats and bagged four this time. Political observers here feel that the ruling CPI(M)'s tribal base has eroded considerably due to its failure to combat insurgency and bring development to the tribal areas. So, this time, the TUJS

LEADING THE LEFT: *Manik Sarkar*

ASHOK MAJUMDER

ASHOKE CHAKRABARTY

PROVING A POINT: *TNV supremo Bijoy Kumar Hrankhawl*

made deep inroads into the red bastion.

The TUJS wrested the Chhamanu seat, which the Left has never lost since 1952. It also ran the CPI(M) close in some of its traditional strongholds like Simna, Pramodnagar, Asharambari, and Ramchandraghat. Left leader Bayjayanti Koloi scraped through by just six votes to bag Takarjal, quite a comedown from the 5,000-plus margin in '93. According to many, the absence of legendary tribal leader and outgoing chief minister Dasarath Deb was sorely felt by the ruling Marxists.

Manik Sarkar, convenor of the ruling Left Front and the man tipped to succeed Deb as chief minister, won the battle

SHOCK DEFEAT: *Sudhir Ranjan Majumdar*

for Dhanpur, the constituency of home minister Samar Chaudhuri. Chaudhuri bagged the West Tripura parliamentary seat this time.

The Left Front fared poorly in the Amarpur sub-division. And many prominent Left leaders tasted defeat. Ten of the 15 Left Front ministers were beaten by Congress candidates. Transport minister Ranjit Debnath was defeated by former minister Jahar Saha; industry minister Tapan Chakraborty lost to former minister Birajit Sinha; the lone Forward Bloc nominee, food minister Brajagopal Roy lost to former TPCC president Ashok Bhattacharya. •

Jayanta Bhattacharya/Agartala

Press and politics

The Press Academy of Andhra Pradesh is dogged by controversy

The function to mark the launching of a lexicon brought out by the Press Academy of Andhra Pradesh (PAAP) turned out to be a hot-bed of controversy in Hyderabad recently. And caught bang in the middle of it all was chief minister N. Chandrababu Naidu.

The chief minister was taken aback when a group of journalists, led by the president of the Andhra Pradesh Union of Working Journalists (APUWJ), Durga Prasad, presented him with a memorandum urging him not to grant extension to Srinivas Reddy, chairman of the PAAP. "The terms of reference of the academy have been violated by him (Reddy) as the funds of the government were used for non-academic purposes...The academy should function specifically and not become a white elephant," read the memorandum.

This put paid to the efforts of chairman Reddy, with the full-throated backing of veteran Telugu editor Sri Ramnohan Rao, to get a resolution passed by the 21-member working council granting him another year's extension.

Many academicians and senior working journalists in the state have been highly critical of the functioning of the PAAP as a tool in the hands of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) government. They allege that Srinivas Reddy, a CPI cadre, has exploited the organisation and reaped political gains to benefit his faction in the APUWJ, affiliated to the communist-led International Union of Journalists (IUJ).

During the Reddy regime, the academy has only held 'training classes' for mofussil journalists (with the objec-

CHIEF PATRON: *Chandrababu Naidu releasing the PAAP lexicon in Hyderabad*

WEST BENGAL

Hook and crook

The CPRM accuses the CPI(M) and the GNLF of 'butchering democracy' and 'betraying Gorkhaland'

Gorkhaland may be their common minimum programme. But the two pro-Gorkhaland parties in the hills of north Bengal — the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) and the Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxist (CPRM) — are set on a collision course.

Immediately after the parliamentary elections, CPRM general secretary R.B. Rai declared war against GNLF supremo Subash Ghisingh. Rai, who lost the electoral battle for Darjeeling to CPI(M) heavyweight Ananda Pathak, branded Ghisingh an "anti-national" and demanded his arrest. Rai's ire was understandable. It was the GNLF's three-day *bandh* call in the hills, following chief minister Jyoti Basu's S.O.S. to Ghisingh, that had kept several CPRM backers away from the booths on 22 February. Ghisingh's decision to call for a 72-hour *bandh* and disrupt the poll process was seen as a blatant bid to bail out Basu's man and check the rise of R.B. Rai, who has emerged as a champion of the Gorkhaland issue and a major player in the hills of north Bengal.

Ashok Bhattacharjee, minister for municipal affairs and veteran CPI(M) leader of north Bengal, has admitted that Ghisingh's poll boycott and three-day *bandh* call had helped CPI(M) candidate Ananda Pathak win the election. In the three Assembly hill segments of Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong, while Pathak bagged only 17,120 votes out of the 70,340 valid votes polled (24.34 per cent), Rai raked in 43,338 votes (61.52 per cent). Once the polls were over and the parliamentary seat pocketed (by hook and crook), Bhattacharjee declared that being the chairman of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), Ghisingh should not go in for poll boycotts or *bandhs* . But, of course, the CPI(M) leader had not aired this view before the polls as "that was our election strategy".

ANANI GHOSH

ON THE ATTACK: *R.B. Rai addresses a CPRM meet*

The CPRM leadership has, naturally, come out strongly against the ruling CPI(M) and CM Jyoti Basu. "The defeat of the CPI(M) candidate from Darjeeling parliamentary constituency was sure to have paved the way for achieving Gorkhaland," insist R.B. Rai and Co. "The CPI(M), and its leader Jyoti Basu, being paranoid about losing one parliamentary seat and the impending compulsion of logically and politically conceding the demand for Gorkhaland, shamelessly connived with the GNLF leader Subash Ghisingh, who called three days *bandh* and boycott. To achieve the desired result, which the CPI(M) and Jyoti Basu wanted to get done through Subash Ghisingh...a wave of terror, intimidation, threats swept the entire hills of Darjeeling for six days. The three Assembly segments in the hills, with 4.5 lakhs voters, polled just 70,000 votes. And the demand for a repoll by all candidates and political parties except the CPI(M) went unheeded."

A recent publication of the breakaway Marxist group, *Butchered Democracy and Betrayed Gorkhaland*, attacks the "Basu-Ghisingh nexus". "Holding of elections in Darjeeling is the extension and application of the provision of the Indian Constitution," reads the 12-page booklet. "By calling for the three-day *bandh* to boycott the election in Darjeeling hills, Ghisingh was pointing his finger to the sovereignty of India over the area and questioning the authority of the Election Commission of India. But this has not become anti-national in the eyes of India's number one Democrat Jyoti Basu and his government...And in the mid-Eighties, Subash Ghisingh and the GNLF was labelled anti-national by Jyoti Basu on the pretext that Ghisingh had written letters to the heads of Government of different countries..."

tive of 'wooing voters' for the APUWJ elections) and given away awards on behalf of the government. It has also brought out some publications propagating a pro-establishment line. Reddy controls the Rs 3 crore union building in the heart of Hyderabad and the Rs 1 crore-budgeted PAAP.

Srinivas Reddy, chief of bureau of the Hyderabad unit of the CPI daily *Vishalandhra*, has played a prominent role in the state journalists' union movement. "He has contributed a lot to the community and nobody can question his services," says a senior editor of a Telugu daily.

But his detractors claim that Reddy had mortgaged the PAAP, first to the Congress regimes of Janardhan Reddy, Channa Reddy and Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy, and then to the Naidu-led TDP.

The differences within the journalistic community have allowed political parties in Andhra to exploit them at will.

The APUWJ remains a major player, having been strengthened over the years by the money and muscle power of the Congress, the TDP and the Left. And the PAAP, of course, remains loyal to its 'patron-saint' chief minister Naidu.

"The media scene has been like this for the last 25 years. The media continue to be subservient to the political powers. The unions have hardly done anything for nearly 500 scribes who lost their jobs and nearly 28 stringers who lost their lives while covering extremist activities," alleges a senior reporter of Karimnagar.

UNHOLY NEXUS?: *Jyoti Basu (left) with Subash Ghisingh*

The CPRM had repeatedly brought the matter of the "unconstitutional, anti-national *bandh* call" to the notice of the divisional commissioner, district magistrate, superintendent of police, state electoral officer, home ministry, and Chief Election Commissioner M.S. Gill. But to no avail.

Delving into history to justify the party's demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland, the CPRM booklet explains: "The Communist Party of India had come into existence in Darjeeling in 1943 with a demand of Gorkhasthan for the distinct national minority of the region. The then Darjeeling District Committee of Communist Party of India had submitted a memorandum demanding Gorkhasthan to the Constituent Assembly on 6th April 1947 with the express and due consent and approval of the higher committee (West Bengal State Committee) and also being guided by it. But after the independence of the country the same Communist Party prescribed regional autonomy for Darjeeling in lieu of Gorkhasthan.. After the formation of the CPI(M) in 1984, regional autonomy for Darjeeling was made the prime political demand of the region by the CPI(M). In 1977 with the installation of the Left Front government in West Bengal, under the leadership of the CPI(M) and its leader Jyoti Basu, resolutions were passed in the West Bengal Assembly demanding...Regional Autonomy for Darjeeling, Terai and Dooars region. In 1978 and 1982, the same resolution was again adopted...The CPI(M) MP Ananda Pathak placed a Bill in Lok Sabha in 1985 under the guidance, consent and approval of the State and Central Committee of the CPI(M) demanding Regional Autonomy for Darjeeling and its continuous areas of Dooars dominantly populated by Nepali and Adivasis. But at the hour of voting on the Bill, it secured 17 votes only out of five dozen Left Front MPs, whereas the CPI(M) alone had three dozen MPs."

"The nakedness of insincerity and diabolical stand and attitude of the CPI(M) MPs clearly unmasked the face of CPI(M) towards Darjeeling, gave fillip to a violent agitation of Gorkhaland by the GNLF under the leadership of Subash Ghisingh..."

Meanwhile, the CPRM leaders are determined to put the Lok Sabha fiasco behind them and set their sights on the forthcoming DGHC elections. Slated for this winter, this should be the real showdown between the GNLF and the CPRM in the hills of north Bengal. •

Iva Guha/Darjeeling

CRIME

Welcome to Calcutta!

A Bangladeshi tourist is gangraped in the Rail Yatri Niwas, exposing the seamy side of Howrah Station

It was the last week of February. The 'city of joy' was preparing for the Lok Sabha elections. The air was filled with political promises: 'we'll bring back Ram Rajya'; 'we'll fight for the downtrodden'; 'we'll empower women'...

On the night of the 25th, Hanufa Khatun, a Bangladeshi citizen touring India, made her way to Calcutta's Howrah Station. She was to embark on a journey to Ajmer Sharief in Rajasthan by the Jodhpur Express. But she did not have a confirmed ticket. So she took the help of some omnipresent and ominpotent touts, who got her a confirmed ticket in no time at all.

Trouble started when Khatun felt ill at ease after having dinner from a roadside restaurant in front of the station. The touts, who had come to her aid earlier, proposed to take her to a "good room" where she could rest before boarding the train.

So, Hanufa Khatun entered room no. 102 of the Rail Yatri Niwas, adjacent to the station. As soon as she entered the room, four touts — Ashoke Singh, Adhesh Singh, Lalan Singh and Sitaram Singh — and commercial supervisor Rafique Ahmed overpowered her. They then gangraped her.

It was 9 pm. The culprits left the room, and kept Khatun locked up. Then, enter Siaram Singh. Siaram told Khatun that she should leave the place at once. "I thought that this man has come to rescue me. But within an hour, I realised that I had made a mistake by trusting him," Hanufa Khatun told SUNDAY, from her bed in S.S.K.M Hospital, Calcutta.

Siaram took Khatun to his Pathuriaghata Street residence in north Calcutta. He and his friend Ramsamiran Singh then proceeded to rape the hapless woman. But this time, Khatun's

DEN OF VICE: *the Rail Yatri Niwas*

PABITRA DAS

WOMAN POWER: *demonstrations against the crime*

cries for help drew the attention of some local residents. They promptly informed the Jorabagan police station. A posse of policemen arrived, rescued Khatun and nabbed the two rapists. After interrogating the two, the police rounded up the other five criminals.

This incident has focused attention on life on the seamier side of Howrah Station, the principal gateway of Calcutta. Over the years, the Howrah Station has become a den of vice. But the administration has been strangely reluctant to take any step against the criminals and the criminal activities thriving here.

The rape of the Bangladeshi tourist has also exposed the nexus between criminals and the railway staff. "It is very easy to keep Howrah Station free from all kind of anti-social activities, but if the railway staff are involved in this kind of activity, then we are helpless," admits a senior officer of the Eastern Railway.

From drug-peddling to prostitution to arms-smuggling, anything is possible in Howrah Station these days. Intelligence reports say that the coal mafia in eastern India had stepped up gun-running through Howrah during the election period. The Government Railway Police (GRP) have beefed up security at the station, but have failed to launch a clean-up drive.

Meanwhile, investigations have indicated that Ashoke Singh, main accused in the Hanufa Khatun rape case, had good contacts with railway minister Ram Vilas Paswan. The GRP recovered one railway pass from Singh, duly signed by Paswan. The police have also come to know that room no. 102 of Yatri Niwas, in which Khatun was gangraped, was booked by Ashoke Singh for three months!

The police are also investigating the track-records of the culprits in order to determine whether they had committed such a crime earlier. "We are now probing how the railway staff were tied up with the touts to carry out such a nasty crime," said Anil Kumar, SSP of Howrah GRP.

But some citizens of Calcutta, outraged at the manner in which a Bangladeshi traveller was victimised, have decided to take the matter to court. Advocate Chandrima Das has filed a public interest litigation before the Calcutta High Court demanding a CBI probe into the Hanufa Khatun case, as two government employees were involved in the crime.

Meanwhile, the victim has been shifted from S.S.K.M. Hospital to the Liluah Home, where she is recovering from the trauma. •

Soumen Datta/Calcutta

TELEVISION

News-crossed

The Great Election Tamasha on TV

My eyes are still crossed. 72-hours into six channels translates into too many moments, and it's only now, when the Great Election Tamasha '98 is safely over, that I can confess how much of a muchness it all was.

The prospect was exciting enough: old hand Prannoy Roy, backed by Mrinal Pande and Rajdeep Sardesai and Vikram Chandra on STAR News (lots of English, some Hindi), Yogendra Yadav, Pushpesh Pant, Rahul Dev and Sanjay Pugalia on DD1 (lots of Hindi, very little English), Karan Thapar, Tavleen Singh, Madhu Trehan on DD2 (mostly English), Vinod Dua and Mark Tully on Sony (half-Hindi, half-English), Nandan Unnikrishnan and Ashok Singh on TVI (with their multilingual bureaus around the country)... All this in addition to Stephen Cole and Daniel Lak on BBC and Anita Pratap on CNN — there was something for all tastes. All live. And all at the same time.

So there was no recourse but to flip madly from one channel to another. In all the backing and forthing, however,

POLL-POURRI: *elections '98*

one lost out on much good stuff: there was a lovely moment when the DD1 team was trying to catch Congress president Sitaram Kesri with a few queries, and he kept posting his own questions. A commercial break came up just then, one switched to another channel, and by the time one came back, the encounter was over.

This set one longing for the time when there was only the national network, which opened up its sequestered portals to Prannoy Roy for the first couple of times when the vote-count happened: television turned electrifying all the more so because we had experienced nothing of the kind before. People called parliamentarians names, and no one blinked.

This time around, the blinking began much too early in the proceedings. It was understandable perhaps because one saw the same faces on different channels, sometimes within the same hour, being quizzed on the same thing. Your eyes would cross, too. •

SUNDAY WEEK

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 15 MARCH, 1998

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

It will be easier for you to get hold of the wrong end of the stick in domestic and family affairs. You probably need to reassess your view of other people's needs and problems. There may be ulterior motives concealed behind offers of help and support. Things may not go according to plan.

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

Win over allies in powerful places. You are likely to hit off so well with such people that you may become firm friends. New ideas for rearranging business finances are likely to prove most acceptable to people who have the final say. You may try to revolutionise outdated systems in office.

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

You are likely to be sharp and alert. There is not much chance of others pulling one over on you now. Nor are they likely to get the better of you in arguments or power struggles. Rivals or competitors may simply hand the field over to you when they see just how efficient you are.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

Information received will be genuine. An admirer will pay you a compliment. Use your personal charm in business affairs. A financial deal can be settled with a bit of tact. But it may be all too easy to part with your own funds.

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

Someone may let you down. Later on, you will regain your confidence and know what you are doing. Spare a thought for the youngsters who are making a way in the world. You may have the opportunity to show them your wisdom and encourage them on their way. Be adventurous where it can produce results.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

Joint initiatives can pay dividends. A change of base will be good. Private deals will work towards increasing family funds. Investments are definitely on, while speculation may fail. Something disorganised at home can now be put right.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

Do not allow unfounded fears to prevent you from taking advantage of promising situations. Be alert for new opportunities. Offers of business mergers should be given serious thought. You may be interested in unusual studies. Journeys off the beaten track can be exciting and productive.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

Get to the bottom of things. Long-standing mysteries can be solved. Lost objects can appear in unexpected places. Unwelcome visitors may turn up or friends may interrupt your seclusion. Personal finances need a more realistic approach.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

Working conditions can be under pressure. Colleagues may be uptight about something, probably money. Be more responsible towards your workers. Listen to what is said and keep your cool. Others may be very emotional and not able to articulate. This you can cope with if you go about it in your usual manner.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

Don't jump to hasty conclusions on the basis of incomplete information. You will probably receive conflicting and garbled versions of the same story from different sources. You will have to be extremely discriminating about what you choose to believe. Sports activities can be revitalising.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

The best thing would be to not look for recognition or praise for work or responsibilities successfully handled. A certain humility will do much to enhance your image and win you the confidence of people who matter. Carry out all undertakings with care and thoroughness.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

Conventions will be constricting because you need to be on your best behaviour. Speak your mind and come straight to the point. But a part of you will be advising more caution and a greater degree of consideration for other people's feelings. •

RANDOM NOTES

Housing problems

Another crisis though not of epic proportions, is building up in Lucknow.

The Loktantrik Congress, which came to the aid of the Kalyan Singh government, now wants to extract the price of its support. Naresh Aggarwal wants the BJP government to sack Pramod Tewari from his post of

Naresh Aggarwal: serving an eviction notice

Leader of the Opposition.

By virtue of being the Leader of the Congress(I) in the Vidhan Sabha, Pramod Tewari had the privileges of a minister of Cabinet rank. He had a house on Lucknow's Lal Bahadur Shastri Marg, cars, servants, and all the other perks of a minister.

However, when Naresh Aggarwal and others walked out of the Congress, the Congress' strength went down drastically in the Vidhan Sabha, Tewari lost his privileged position.

Now Aggarwal and others say he should vacate his house, and return his cars. He is no longer leader of the Opposition after they left the Congress.

[illegible] the post of Leader of the Opposition will naturally go to someone else. And Tewari will have to face serious housing problems.

HEARD IN THE BJP OFFICE

With Pals like that, you don't need any enemies.

A KALYAN SINGH SUPPORTER, ON THE PERILS OF FORMING A GOVERNMENT WITH THE SUPPORT OF FORMER CONGRESSMEN, AFTER JAGADAMBIKA PAL TOPPLED THE BJP GOVERNMENT IN UP

Demolition squad

Having won the Ghosi seat by a reasonable margin, former minister Kalpnath Rai is back in action — in favour of the BJP.

Rai is ready to chew up anyone who suggests that it might be possible to see a Congress-led government in the course of the present Lok Sabha. In fact, he says, he had offered his good offices during the earlier 13-day tenure of Atal Behari Vajpayee and suggested a way of staying on in power. But the party didn't take him seriously.

He had suggested then that taking advantage of its tenure in power, the BJP consider impleasing P.V. Narasimha Rao in the urea scam. *"Maine kaha tha, Narasimha Rao ko jail bhej deejiye, aur phir dekhiye, kitne sare log Congress say BJP mein aate hain* (I'd said, put Narasimha Rao in jail in the urea scam and then see how Congressmen come running to the BJP)," he remarked. The logic of this is hard to understand, but Rai's animus against Rao isn't.

The BJP didn't listen to him then. Maybe, it will listen now.

All about a frog

Suresh Kalmadi is furious at his one-time mentor, Sharad Pawar. Not only did Pawar make sure Kalmadi lost the election, but added insult to injury by referring to Kalmadi throughout the campaign as a frog.

Not true, says Pawar, all injured innocence. He never called Kalmadi a frog. He only reported to the constituency what other leaders, including those who were supporting Kalmadi in the election, were saying. Balasaheb Thackeray, for instance, whose Shiv Sena did not put up a candidate against Kalmadi, said that Kalmadi was like a frog because he

Suresh Kalmadi: angry and bitter

jumped from party to party.

Kalmadi, angry and bitter, is now issuing dark threats about all that he knows about Sharad Pawar. "If I start talking..." he says.

Pawar says he's not afraid. "You know what happens to frogs when they talk — they croak," he's reported to have told friends. Make what you like of that. •

CHECK-LIST

Why the BJP lost Maharashtra and Rajasthan

■ The Jats' vote in Rajasthan, the Jats voted [illegible] for the Congress(I) in a silent protest against the pro-Rajput position of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) chief minister Bhairon Singh Shekhawat.

■ [illegible] in Maharashtra, Sharad Pawar pulled out all the anti-BJP parties, leading to a one-sided fight.

■ Corruption in both Rajasthan and Maharashtra, corruption charges against the state governments made voters determined to bring in the Congress(I) at the Centre.

■ The Shiv Sena's [illegible] in Maharashtra, more than the Rajasthan, the BJP and Shiv Sena played the mood of the electorate completely. Particularly unfavourable in favour of [illegible] they [illegible] from Marathi

Crash landing

Pramod Mahajan is finding it impossible to come to terms with the fact that he's actually lost the Lok Sabha election. He says, he worked so hard. Then why did he lose?

Maybe that's just part of the truth. He did work hard: but not in his own constituency.

Mahajan had got a helicopter and was jetting it to Bihar, Rajasthan and sundry

Pramod Mahajan: wrong strategy

other states, campaigning for the party's candidates, in the fond hope that his own constituency was all sewn up. In other words, he had elevated himself to the level of Atal Behari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani. While lesser mortals like Sushma Swaraj were working humbly and hard in their areas, Mahajan thought the country needed him more than Bombay (north-east).

Gurudas Kamath, the Congress candidate who defeated him, made full use of this. He invited Banwarilal Purohit, the erstwhile BJP member who has a list of scandals Mahajan is involved in, to Bombay (north-east) and got him to make speeches against Mahajan. The result? While Mahajan was flying around the country, his constituency was flying out of his hands.

> HEARD IN THE JANATA DAL OFFICE
>
> **There was a Sonia wave — only so long as she waved.**
>
> JAIPAL REDDY, FORMER MINISTER

Saffron signals

Why does Sahib Singh Verma keep meeting O.P. Chautala?

The BJP, familiar with the to-ing and fro-ing tendency among politicians in Haryana, is pulling out all stops in wooing Chautala. Madan Lal Khurana has established a relationship with Chautala via Punjab chief minister Prakash Singh Badal. And Delhi chief minister Sahib Singh Verma has utilised the services of Dharamdev Solanki, a BJP MP who has helped Chautala in the election, to build up a relationship with the Jat strongman.

This doesn't mean that Verma is turning his back on old friend Bansi Lal, who is a BJP ally. And nor is Bansi Lal naive enough to believe that Chautala is helping the BJP out of sheer altruism. Clearly, the support to the BJP has a price. But all that will come later. For the moment, it is enough to keep Chautala within the fold.

Vinod Khanna on world trade

The Bharatiya Janata Party is harping on the fact that its new MPs are young, fresh and dynamic and will therefore make for a government which will have new ideas. While that may be so, the party would do well to put first-timers through a crash course on the party policies.

Take Vinod Khanna. Flush from his victory in Punjab, when the actor was asked by the press what role he was going to play in the new Lok Sabha, he said he would carry out his party's policies.

Which was fine. But what about the BJP's economic policies? How would Vinod Khanna tackle the issue of patents? What was the BJP's stand on the WTO?

"WTO? What's that?" asked Khanna.

After it was explained to him that the WTO was an international body for multilateral trade, he wanted to know what the controversy

Vinod Khanna: he knows about patents was all about. Another legality [illegible] basmati rice, turmeric and tulsi followed.

Khanna listened carefully and gave his verdict. Of course, we'll patent rice and turmeric, he said, and [illegible] that no-one could [illegible] don't we do [illegible] we have [illegible]

CHECK-LIST

The giant slayers in the new Lok Sabha

Sartaj Singh: The Bardarji of Hoshangabad was the only Sikh member (minister for human resource development) in the 13-day Cabinet of Atal Behari Vajpayee. He defeated Arjun Singh by the sheer force of his *namastas* and his humility. Hoshangabad voted against Arjun Singh out of anger.

Sompal: Everyone — Atal Behari Vajpayee, the BJP, Kalyan Singh — was wrong about Sompal. Only L.K. Advani was sure that Sompal would win. He persisted on giving the Baghpat ticket to him, rather than to Ajit Singh who went over to the Congress(I) in disgust. But Sompal proved a point and defeated the son of Chaudhary Charan Singh in the heart of Jatland.

Sanjay Singh: The Raja of Amethi may have personal problems, but he's managed the seat, despite the money Satish Sharma poured into Amethi.

Kamal Nath: Who would have thought that the bubblegum kid would have had it in him? Not only did he demolish the former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh but even managed to win by one of the highest margins in the new Lok Sabha.

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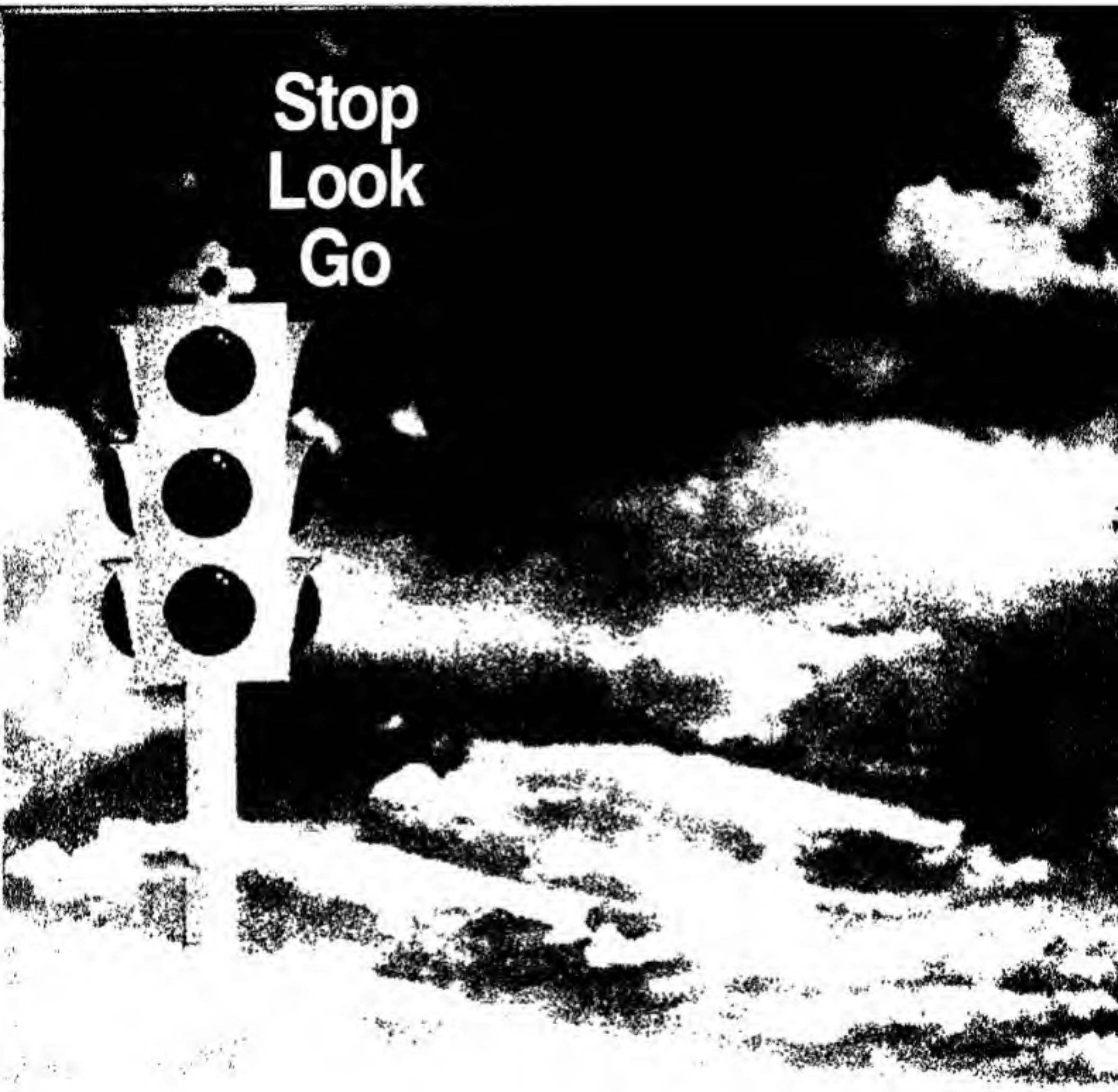

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Hijacking the gods

The VHP takeover of the Pirana Dargah is almost complete

Cover artwork: Subin Das

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Uphill road

Your cover story *Prime Minister* (8 — 14 March) has rightly pointed out that for Vajpayee, the road ahead is truly uphill. Without a clear mandate, he'll have to stitch together a coalition, but heading a government comprising 17 parties with diverse ideologies, it will be tough implementing measures he had announced before the polls.

Vajpayee has said that the party's alleged hostility to Muslims is a canard, and the only 'minority' not welcome is 'predatory' foreign investment. But for the moment, as he has said, it's a new bolder and more confident India that is emerging.

S.M. Patel, Baroda (Gujarat)

■ If the BJP comes to power, it's going to be a wobbly coalition. Last week, the AIADMK played sly and MPs were instructed to send their letters of support directly to the President instead of routing them through Vajpayee. It clearly indicates that AIADMK MPs are not under Vajpayee's thumb.

With Jayalalitha insisting that the DMK government be dismissed by using Article 356, it's turbulent times ahead for Vajpayee. Though the BJP leaders were playing down the embarrassment, a coalition government of unstable partieswill find it hard to deliver. But for the moment, no issue is more pressing than stability at a time of widespread political and financial turmoil in Asia.

Paban Malhotra, Calcutta (West Bengal)

Vajpayee: hard times ahead

Star value?

The cartoon, *A meeting in the life of Sonia Gandhi!* (*Sight & Sound* 15 — 21 February) has brought out the true worth of the Congress party's star campaigner. Even her sycophants in the party had to harp more on her charismatic appeal than any qualification. As for her scripted speeches in Hindi, these were given to her in Roman script which she just managed to read out monotonously without, perhaps, even knowing the significance of the words used.

Sonia Gandhi: all sound and fury

Her so-called mammoth rallies were mostly stage-managed by free bus rides for the crowd who were provided with extra entertainment. At her Ram Lila maidan rally in Delhi, noted qawali singer Ehsan Bharati was reportedly forced by the crowd to continue even after Sonia's arrival. Speaks for the real star value, doesn't it?

Amarnath Kamat, Bombay (Maharashtra)

Security first

It was shocking to know how even the country's defence forces are not spared the bureaucratic red tape (*Cry in the wilderness* 8 — 14 March). Politicians are so busy with their own vested interests that they don't even have time to think about India's security. Otherwise, what could be the reason for not paying heed to the advices of the service chiefs?

Now, it is up to the President to take up the matter before things get worse.

Shankar Dewan, Siliguri (West Bengal)

Biased view

In the story, *The eligible bureaucrat* (18 — 24 January), questions are raised about the validity of granting extension to Mata Prasad. But R.C. Sharma, D.R. Karthikeyan and the present cabinet secretary, T.S.R. Subramaniam also got extensions. But nobody surprisingly raised a hue and cry.

Maybe, Mata Prasad belongs to the Scheduled Caste and that is why questions are being raised now?

Praveen Kumar, Ajmer (Rajasthan)

Shame Governor, shame!

This refers to the story *The Lucknow Drama*. Mulayam Singh shamelessly masterminded the plan which was abetted by Mayawati. But how blatantly it wasexecuted by Governor Romesh Bhandari!

But more shocking is that a man who has been playing such unfair games and so shamelessly abusing his position, is still enjoying power.

Abhilasha Ojha, New Delhi

■ *The Lucknow drama* is a well-presented story. Never in India's political history has a Governor been so deviously manipulative as Romesh Bhandari. He had even spurned the President's suggestion.

Should we require the

post of Governor which is only a political appointment? The Chief Justice of India can perform his functions in the event of an exigency. But no person will tolerate a Governor having ulterior motives.

Dr U.S. Iyer, Bangalore (Karnataka)

■ The Lucknow episode has shown that all ideology has been dumped and the politicians in India's largest state have become laughing stock (*The Lucknow drama* (1 — 7 March). But winning the numbers game in UP and remaining in power at the Centre are two different things. UP may have been 'won' for the moment but it's only a minor battle compared to what it's going to face in the future. The BJP top brass must realise that. The people have now wisened up to the situation and it's unlikely that there will be one-sided mandates any more, and that coalitions are no longer a luxury but a necessity. The BJP, and others too, have to come to terms with this.

Arup Banerjee, Bombay (Maharashtra)

Bhandari: master manipulator

Advising parents

Robert Vijay Gupta is undoubtedly a prodigy (*Little maestro* 22 — 28 February). But without taking anything away from his own genius, parental help must also have made the boy what he is: a brilliant violinist. It would be nice if all parents were as understanding and let their children do what they liked doing. Most Indian parents have a fixed conception: their children either have to be engineers, doctors or bureaucrats. So any deviation in terms of hobby or inclination like singing, dancing, dramatics or sports is frowned upon.

It's a misconception that only children with particular backgrounds can excel in life. Fierce competition and undue academic stress are responsible for the increase in the suicide rate among the youth. We need to be more realistic.

Malini Pandey, New Delhi

Carry on Yasin

Yasin Pathan's crusading zeal to preserve dilapidated temples is admirable.

Pathan: zealous crusader

(*Saving grace* 1 — 7 March). Though he was a Muslim, Yasin embarked on a serious mission in saving Hindu temples in ruins in Pathra in Midnapore, West Bengal. His sincere effort in preserving ancient monuments would put an archaeologist to shame. Kudos to Yasin.

Bhupen Bose, Calcutta (West Bengal)

■ It was touching to read about Yasin Pathan's lone odyssey to protect ancient Hindu temples from ruin (*Saving grace*, 1 — 7 March). It's sad that Pathra's local people have been uncooperative, and it's sheer narrow-mindedness of Hindus to think of temples as their private property. The irony is that Hindus themselves are responsible for the run-down conditions of these temples. And it's also absurd that the same people who abet antique smuggling are branding Pathan as 'insane'. Maybe, it needed someone not motivated by 'religious' feelings but by the love of our heritage to do something to preserve these temples.

Prerona Prasad, Shimla (Himachal Pradesh)

Tough measures

In your 22 — 28 February issue, in which Muivah's interview appeared, there was also another news item (*Gun-running*) about the Indian Army seizing large quantity of sophisticated arms near the Andaman islands meant for the Naga rebels. The plain fact is that the NSCN, which is aided by foreign support, is a separatist outfit and is fighting for an independent Nagaland under the guise of 'Naga country'. New Delhi should solve the north-eastern problem on a war-footing.

N. Prasad, New Delhi

In our Spotlight column of the issue dated 8 — 14 March, we said Satyajit Ray died on 2 May, 1992. It should have read 23 April, 1992.

The error is regretted. — Editor.

Cartoon by Ravi Srivastava, Calcutta (West Bengal)

MILESTONES

SWORN IN: the fourth Left Front ministry in Tripura, headed by Manik Sarkar of CPI(M), on 11 March. His Cabinet has 17 ministers.

SWORN IN: B.B. Lyngdoh, as chief minister of Meghalaya, on 10 March. His appointment came after the resignation of S.C. Marak's ministry.

NOMINATED: Hollywood star Richard Gere, as chairman of the

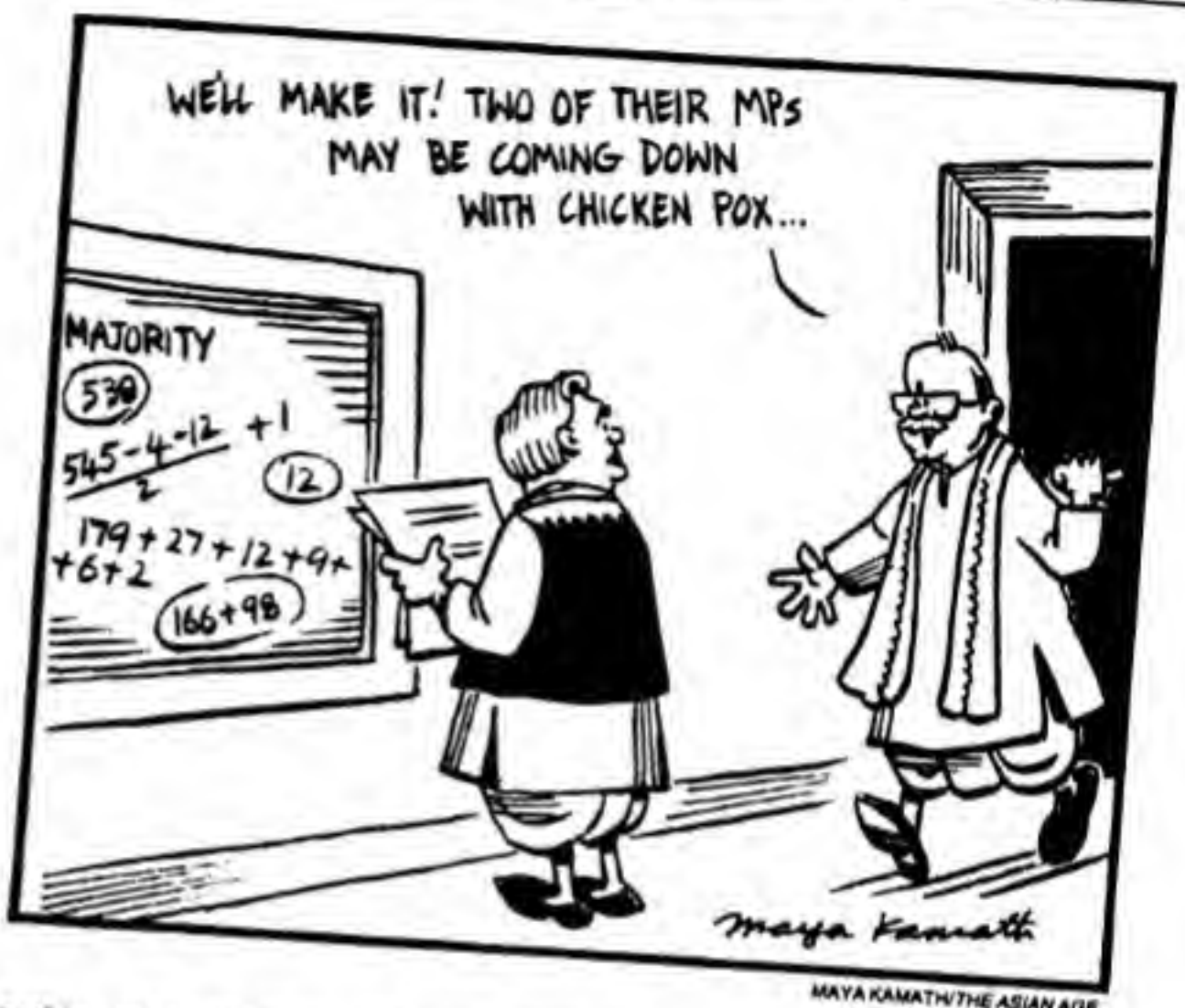
Gaya-based Mahabodhi Temple Development Sub-committee, on 9 March. Gere had visited Bodh Gaya in January.

RESIGNED: Brijbihari Prasad, energy minister of Bihar, from the Rabri Devi Cabinet, on 8 March. He was allegedly involved in the murder of Devendra Dubey, the Samajwadi Party candidate from Motihari.

RULED: by Supreme Court, on 8 March, that any person giving "stop payment" instruction immediately after issuing a cheque against any debt or liability, will not be able to escape prosecution.

[illegible]: Sikkim [illegible] Front leader [illegible] minister Pawan [illegible], on 7 March, as [illegible] of the party for [illegible] years.

SIGHT & SOUND



MAYA KAMATH/THE ASIAN AGE

■ I have nothing to say right now. What comments do you expect from me everyday?

N. CHANDRABABU NAIDU, *TDP leader and UF convenor, refusing to comment on his party's stand on government formation at the Centre*

■ As a person, I will not be a part of the government, but my party members will participate in the government. We want to strengthen the BJP at the Centre.

GEORGE FERNANDES, *Samata Party leader*

■ The greatest curse would befall this nation if Sonia Gandhi became the Prime Minister.

J. JAYALALITHA, *AIADMK supremo, reacting to Congressmen's appeal to Sonia Gandhi to take over the reins of the party*

■ **We will not ask for the dismissal of the West Bengal government. But we would like a thorough probe carried out into financial irregularities like misuse of panchayat funds and the ledger scam.**

MAMATA BANERJEE, *Trinamul Congress leader*

■ I have been criticised for my move. But does anyone realise that my move checkmated the exodus of United Front and Congress MPs to the BJP?

HARKISHEN SINGH SURJEET, *CPI(M) general secretary, justifying his effort to form a Congress-led coalition at the Centre*

■ Nothing happened (earlier). I wasn't into PR in a big way. PR *kiya to darna kya*?

JAVED JAFFRI, *veejay and film actor*

SEEN

On the hour, every hour

Studio surfing is a new trend among politicians

EMULATING THE GRASSHOPPER: *common to all channels*

In the beginning came the grasshoppers. There is no scope for sociological insights into their basic habits, propelled as they were by biological compulsions. Hopping was thus their forte.

Till mankind developed. Now many more varieties of hopping have come to be accepted as part of the everyday lexicon. You can't be part of the 'happening' crowd today until you're known to be a party-hopper.

The other kind of hoppers jumped from bed to bed. And loyalty being edged out of the list of moral necessities, job hoppers are no longer viewed disapprovingly as being of 'unstable temperament' — they're now considered the inhabitants of the fast track.

Society having evolved way beyond the verdure of grass, there are now any number of challengers to the original hopper label. Politicians who move from party to party have been supplanted by the emergence of a subset in their ranks: those who hopped from studio to TV studio during the 72 hours that India was riveted to the idiot box, the hourly updates on election results, the round-the-clock coverage of the fates of those who contested the recent Lok Sabha elections.

The studio hopper lives in the well-lit soundproof environs of the TV studio and his mission is to move from one studio to another — DD1,DD2, Star, Zee, TVI...Because television has come of age in India, and because anchors have to have someone to talk to, the studio hopper will never die out because it has positioned itself as a person who can make observations with great insight.

But this is television and not the print media, where the same statements are rehashed several times over. Besides the sound bite, TV is also about looks. The viewer finally knows who Ahluwalia is, and who Kesri is. What you wear and how you look makes a difference. Fashion has begun to cast its shadow on the humdrum world of politics.

As a result, for 72 hours studio hoppers shifted into their cars/vans. Rather like Clark Kent who used telephone booths to slip into Superman mode, Waseem Ahmad, Pramod Mahajan, Venkaiah Naidu all had well-ironed jackets, blazers, *sherwanis* and Nehru jackets folded neatly on the back seats of their cars. Each outfit was for a different studio, the choice determined by what the other guests were wearing.

The Indian politician is still new to TV and khadi severely curtails the choice of colour. But hang around guys — because the political studio hopper is here to stay. •

Aditi Phadnis/New Delhi

The studio hopper lives in the well-lit soundproof environs of the TV studio and his mission is to move from one studio to another

SUPER LEADER

Purno Sangma *wants everyone to agree beforehand on whatever he might have to do as Speaker*

There he was all dressed up in poly-khadi waiting for the reporters and TV cameras to turn up. And he was playing it very very safe. While Atal Behari Vajpayee and others were sweating it out the whole of last fortnight, alternating between hot flushes and cold showers, Purno Agitok Sangma was waiting, cool as a cucumber. He knew he would be considered for the speakership of the Lok Sabha at one or the other point in the near future. And he made his intentions quite clear.

"The Bharatiya Janata Party is not untouchable. I have always been against the politics of exclusion," he said to reporters when asked if he thought that the BJP was a communal party. Besides, he said, hadn't they given up their agenda of imposing a common civil code and Article 370, etc.? And, he said, the BJP is bound to be more stable than all the others because it is a national party leading a coalition, instead of a group of regional parties being backed by a national one.

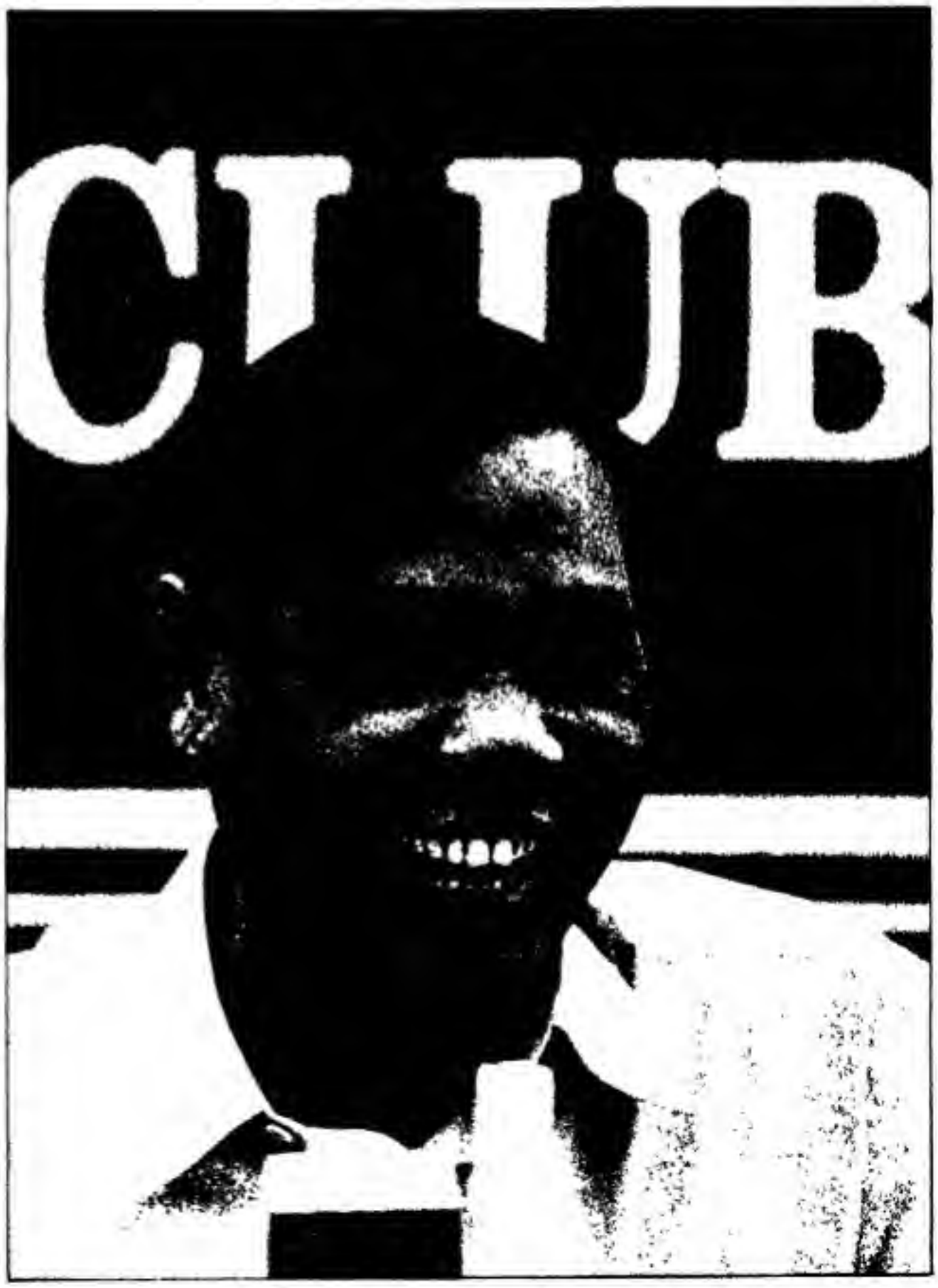
So, Sangma had won over the biggest chunk of the Lok Sabha, which might have excluded him from its list of candidates for the speakership. The Congress? Well, that was his own party. And the United Front was hardly a party at all.

But he said he was hankering after no posts (now why does that sound so familiar?) and would therefore not accept the speakership unless there was a consensus among all parties on the subject.

Having softened up the BJP for consensus by being flattering about it, Sangma made an unspoken promise to the party as well: should he get the Speaker's job, the BJP would not find him unfair or partisan.

After all, that's what being the Speaker is all about.

In the past, Sangma has always been forthright about his views. He rapped the bureaucracy for not representing the interests of the people, criticised the lack of decorum among members and beca-



In the fractured state of the Lok Sabha, the Speaker could easily be called upon to play a role far beyond his station, maybe even play Prime Minister by proxy

me a willing leader of the first-time MPs who appealed to him to become their leader and stand between the intransigence of their parties and election.

Also, he roundly criticised the Supreme Court for entering into the UP Assembly and taking over what was essentially the job of the Speaker. Starchily, he observed that so far as conducting the business of the House was concerned, "I don't think the judiciary can or should give any direction to the Speaker. I hope such things do not occur in the future."

It requires considerable gumption to say this to the highest court of the land. Sangma rapped the court without hesitation or fear.

But while he doesn't shy away from contentious situations, Sangma says he will be happy to become the Speaker again, provided everyone is agreed that he should have the job.

His logic is unexceptionable. He says India has a fractured Lok Sabha and if a Speaker is expected to be impartial, the House must agree that the person appointed as an umpire is the one in whom everyone has confidence. "If we cannot avoid an election for the Speaker's post, I will stay out of the fray," he said, adding he would tell his party to find someone else.

So, is Sangma — everyone's pal in the Lok Sabha because he calls everyone *yaar* no matter how high the temperatures — only seeking a consensus on speakership or is the matter a little more complex than that?

The fact is that he has stopped a little short of stating the complete agenda. In the fractured state of the Lok Sabha, the Speaker could easily be called upon to play a role far beyond his station — maybe even play Prime Minister by proxy. Sangma is happy to be the Prime Minister of a national government but wants everyone to agree to this role beforehand.

Is that so bad? Considering the sorry dance Jayalalitha has led the BJP through, it is entirely likely that the Lok Sabha will need a super leader, who will smooth ruffled feathers and keep the House intact (though Sangma has won his constituency, Tura, by more than one lakh votes and is in no danger of losing from there, it is unlikely that he would want to go for another election so soon). The Speaker will have to do what the Prime Minister can't do — give assurances on behalf of the government, sometimes even cover up for the government especially to prevent the government from falling.

In the circumstances, he feels he must have everyone's backing for whatever he will have to do if he becomes Speaker. Will such a situation materialise?

It looks as if the House will be polarised on the matter. The United Front has declared that it will not support a person who is seen as being a Congressman and also being close to the RSS. The CPI(M) has announced that it will support the Congress and therefore Sangma in the choice of Speaker. "If the BJP wants to set up their own candidate, let them. But they must understand that losing an election for Speaker is like losing a confidence motion. Convention dictates that they must resign," the CPI(M) has said.

The BJP has said that the last time around, though it was still the single-largest party in the Lok Sabha, the Congress had dictated the choice of Speaker, leaving the deputy speakership to the BJP. This time, it is ready to leave the deputy speakership to the Congress.

The Congress has no complaints from Sangma. With Sonia Gandhi becoming the party president, it is unlikely that anyone would question her endorsement of the Speaker.

So it looks as if the chair is secure for the man from the hills. Now it's just a question of someone making the suggestion. And he's saying it when *yaar*...? •

Considering the sorry dance Jayalalitha has led the BJP through, it is likely that the Lok Sabha will need someone to smooth ruffled feathers and keep the House intact

Aditi Phadnis/New Delhi

RAJIV SHUKLA

The instability factor

Verdict 1998 is even worse than verdict 1996

I totally disagree with the assumption that the Indian electorate is the wisest. With due apology to everyone, I would like to say that India has got the most stupid voters. For the fourth time consecutively Indians have given hung Parliament without realising the consequences. It is shocking to know that in the recent election when stability was the major issue, our voters have given a multiple-fractured mandate.

Verdict 1998 is worse than verdict 1996 from all aspects. In the last Lok Sabha, we had 28 political parties in the House. This time when everybody was talking about stability, we have got 42 political parties in the new Lok Sabha. Now, how can you say that Indian voters have given a good verdict?

I presume our voters do not care for national problems and the major issues but go by small considerations like caste, region and the incumbency factor. Our voters must distinguish between issues of parliamentary and Assembly elections. If they are unhappy with the state government, they vote against it in Lok Sabha elections, which is quite funny. They have to make a distinction between state government and central government.

For example, what I feel is that Chandrababu Naidu is playing a destructive role in national politics. He is trying to keep both the BJP and the United Front on tenterhooks and bargaining for his position. The voters of Andhra Pradesh should not have given any Lok Sabha seat to him and, instead, voted for either the Congress or the BJP allies. Unfortunately, they have given 12 seats to Naidu and he is turning out to be a kingmaker just because of that.

I have got a serious grievance against educated people who are opinion mobilisers. Instead of moulding the opinion of less educated and illiterate people

A voters' queue: are they really concerned?

Indian voters don't care for national problems, but go by small considerations like caste, region and the incumbency factor

before the elections, they themselves do not go to vote. On polling day they stay home and enjoy a holiday. When a political crisis occurs and instability causes harm to the economy and society, the same people criticise politicians and voters over whisky in parties.

This time, thanks to the publicity campaign by the Election Commission and Doordarshan, the voting percentage has slightly increased. In fact, the government should frame a law that those who do not vote will not get jobs, bank loans, ration cards and electricity connections.

Casteism and communalism are basically responsible for hung Parliaments and Assemblies. Instead of judging a political party by its performance, our voters vote for the candidate of their own caste or for the party headed by a leader of their own community. This has destroyed the basic fabric of democracy. All political parties should be discouraged for distributing tickets on caste and communal lines.

To avoid the instability factor, I strongly feel that Prime Ministers and chief ministers should be directly elected by the people for a term of five years. In fact, several regional parties including the AIADMK have included this demand in their manifestos.

There is also a suggestion that the term of Lok Sabha should be fixed for five years and it cannot be dissolved before that. Governments may come and may go, but Lok Sabha will last for five years. This suggestion can also be considered but it will provide ample opportunity for horse-trading. Our anti-defection law also needs to be amended as it does not serve the purpose. Now the requisite strength for a split in a party should be half the total strength instead of one-third. •

INDER MALHOTRA

Proxy war

Pakistan officially blames India for a bomb blast near Lahore

In the midst of the high drama and low comedy surrounding the formation of the BJP-led government, a rather serious development in India-Pakistan relations has gone practically unnoticed. For the first time, the Pakistani foreign office has formally blamed this country for a ghastly bomb blast in a railway train near Lahore. The Indian deputy high commissioner, Sharat Sabharwal, immediately and emphatically repudiated the charge and rejected Islamabad's protest note.

What has happened may not be a great surprise but it does raise some pertinent questions. As the wide world knows, India has been the target of Pakistan-sponsored and Pakistan-backed terrorism and secessionism for a long time. In Kashmir, proxy war has gone on for nearly a decade. Shortly before the start of the voting, there was in Kashmir a massacre of the entire Pandit population of a village by mercenaries of foreign origin and trained in Afghanistan who have lately been infiltrated into J&K in fairly large numbers. Then there were the serial blasts in Coimbatore and so on.

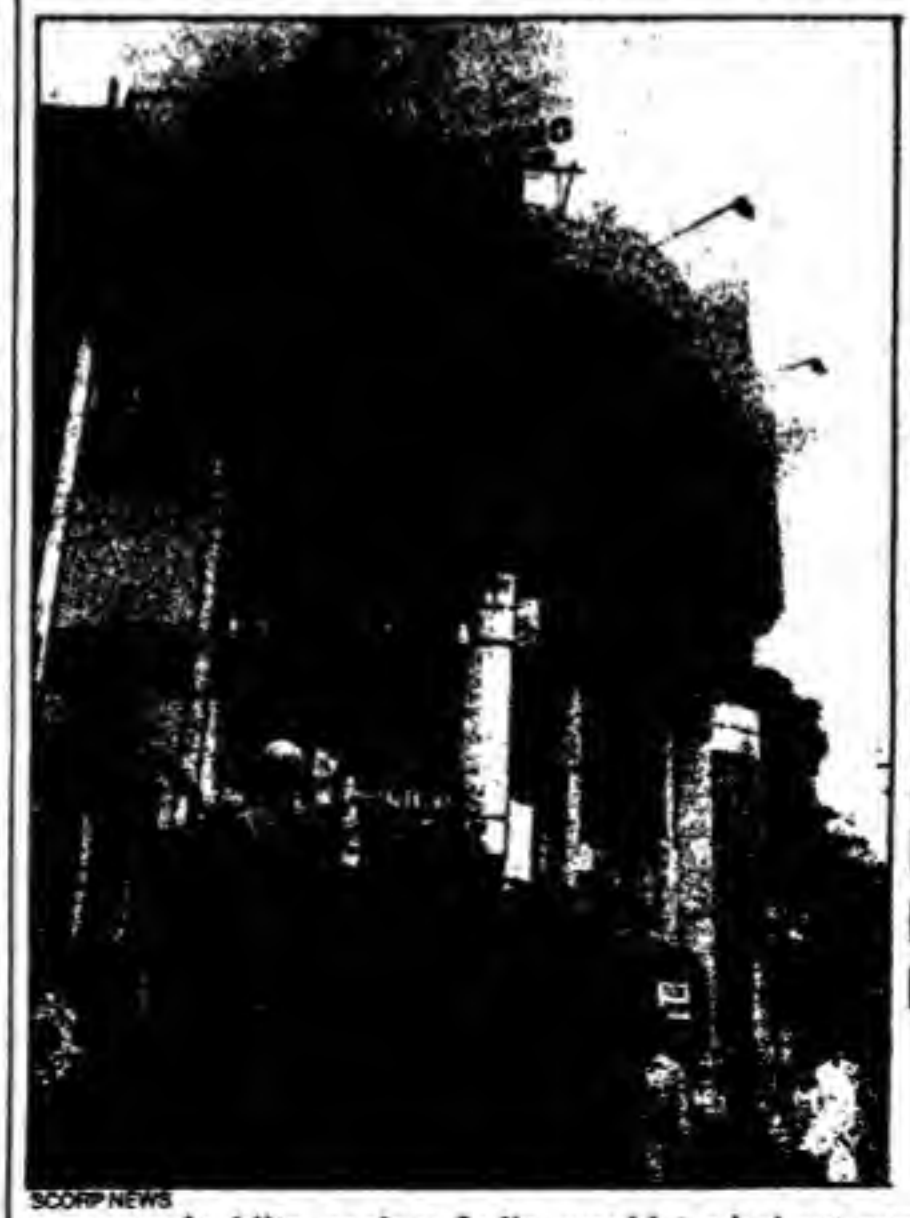
For the two unspeakable outrages the Indian government has squarely blamed Pakistan, especially its notorious ISI. But neither now nor in the past did New Delhi take the step of lodging an official protest and summoning the Pakistani high commissioner or his deputy, though messages have often been passed formally and privately, or sometimes through third parties. Up to now, Pakistan, too, has done the same thing. It would publicly blame Indian intelligence agencies for various acts of violence bedevilling it.

Why has the Pakistani government departed from the usual practice and tried to create a diplomatic row with India? Only two plausible reasons can be thought of. The first is that the Pakistani PM, Nawaz Sharif, having been forced to go back on his earlier policy of an active dialogue with this country, must have found the latest incident highly embarrassing to him, considering that it took place close to Lahore, his own hometown and political bastion.

Secondly, the Pakistani establishment perhaps decided to take advantage of the power vacuum in New Delhi to embark on oneupmanship in both diplomacy and information warfare. Diplomatically, the cause of the hard-liners in Islamabad will be furthered. This will help them to frustrate meaningful resumption of the dialogue. The publicity and propaganda blitz against India would also enable Pakistan to divert attention from the ISI's activities at Coimbatore or in Kashmir. Soon after the serial bomb blasts in Bombay in March 1993, the then army chief, late General Bipin Joshi, had spoken of the ISI's "inverted crescent from Thekadi to Tripura". Thekadi, it may be added, is the village on the Maharashtra coast where one-and-a-half tons of RDX were brought in. Since then the situation has worsened.

Under the circumstances, it was both ironic and brazen that the Pakistani foreign office should have harangued the Indian diplomat on the evils of the "self-defeating" terrorism as an "instrument of state policy". Equally bizarre is the Pakistani warning that if such an exercise was not brought to an "immediate end", India would "have to face the consequences". What more can our Pakistani friends do which they are not doing already?

However, two questions must be asked about ourselves. It is all very well screaming about the ISI's nefarious activities targeting this country. But why are the relevant instruments of the Indian state proving to be so ineffective in countering and curbing these activities? Secondly, while the policy of diplomatic restraint has merit, must it be followed under all circumstances? By striking diplomatically first, Pakistan has given itself an edge and an advantage. •



SCORP NEWS

As the wide world knows, India has been the target of Pak-sponsored and Pak-backed terrorism and secessionism for a long time. The latest being the Coimbatore blasts

Hijacking the gods

The VHP takeover of the Pirana Dargah is almost complete

Pirana, a nondescript village nearly 20 kilometres from Ahmedabad, is not yet on the list of religious shrines in India over which a dispute is on. But it soon will be. The *sangh parivar* is attempting to wrest control of a number of shrines which have a composite religious following. If it has its way, Pirana will be the first to give the lie to the Bharatiya Janata Party's repeated assertion that it will not impose Hinduism on anyone.

Muslims who were devotees of the *dargah* have been now virtually debarred entry to the shrine by Hindu priests. As a result, they have turned to the court for justice. With a carefully non-committal judiciary, the Muslims are wondering if the issue will ever get a hearing. Says Syed Mustafa Hussain, "Our gods have been hijacked by these people."

The phrase 'these people' refers to a band of local Hindu devotees having active links with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. The gods which have been hijacked owe their origin to Hajrat Pir Imam Shah Baba, who according to common lore, came to Gujarat from across the Indus nearly 450 years ago.

Legend has it that Imam Shah moved eastwards after he felt that Islam had some limitations that needed to be embellished with elements of other spiritual traditions. He first set up base at a small town in Kutch district and later an establishment at Pirana. A saintly man, he soon drew followers — first from among the local Muslims and later from among the lower-caste Hindus.

After incorporating elements of local Hindu traditions into some Islamic rituals and spiritual premises, Imam Shah named his order Satyapanth and declared that followers of the order would be called Satyapanthis.

As the following swelled, the Imam, like a true democrat, ordained that the affairs of the sect be governed by a council comprising ten persons of whom only three would be Muslims and the rest Hindus. Shah also decreed that after his death the sect would be headed by someone elected by the council who would be called a *kaka*.

For centuries there was no rift within the sect over the election of the *kaka* and the Satyapanthis emerged as one of the most influential religious sects in western India by the turn of the century.

The most significant aspect of the sect was its spiritual base that drew elements from all religions. An indication of this is the massive flagstaff akin to the *nishansahib* at every gurdwara, the only difference being the colour of the flag: white instead of saffron.

As the sect grew, so did the *dargah* that started with a small tomb erected in memory of Imam Shah after his death. Tombs of various *kakas* who died were added over the centuries and even now each one is revered.

The *dargah* of Pirana Pir: '*Om*' signs have appeared on the walls

NILANJAN MUKHOPADHYAY

Within the first few decades of the 20th century, the managers of the sect came to terms with the emerging system of governance in the country and decided to register the *dargah* under the Registration of Societies Act. This was probably the first instance of registering a religious body.

That however, made no impact on the functioning of the Satyapanth which continued to grow with the followers having a symbiotic relationship. All this however started changing in the late Eighties and has now led to a situation

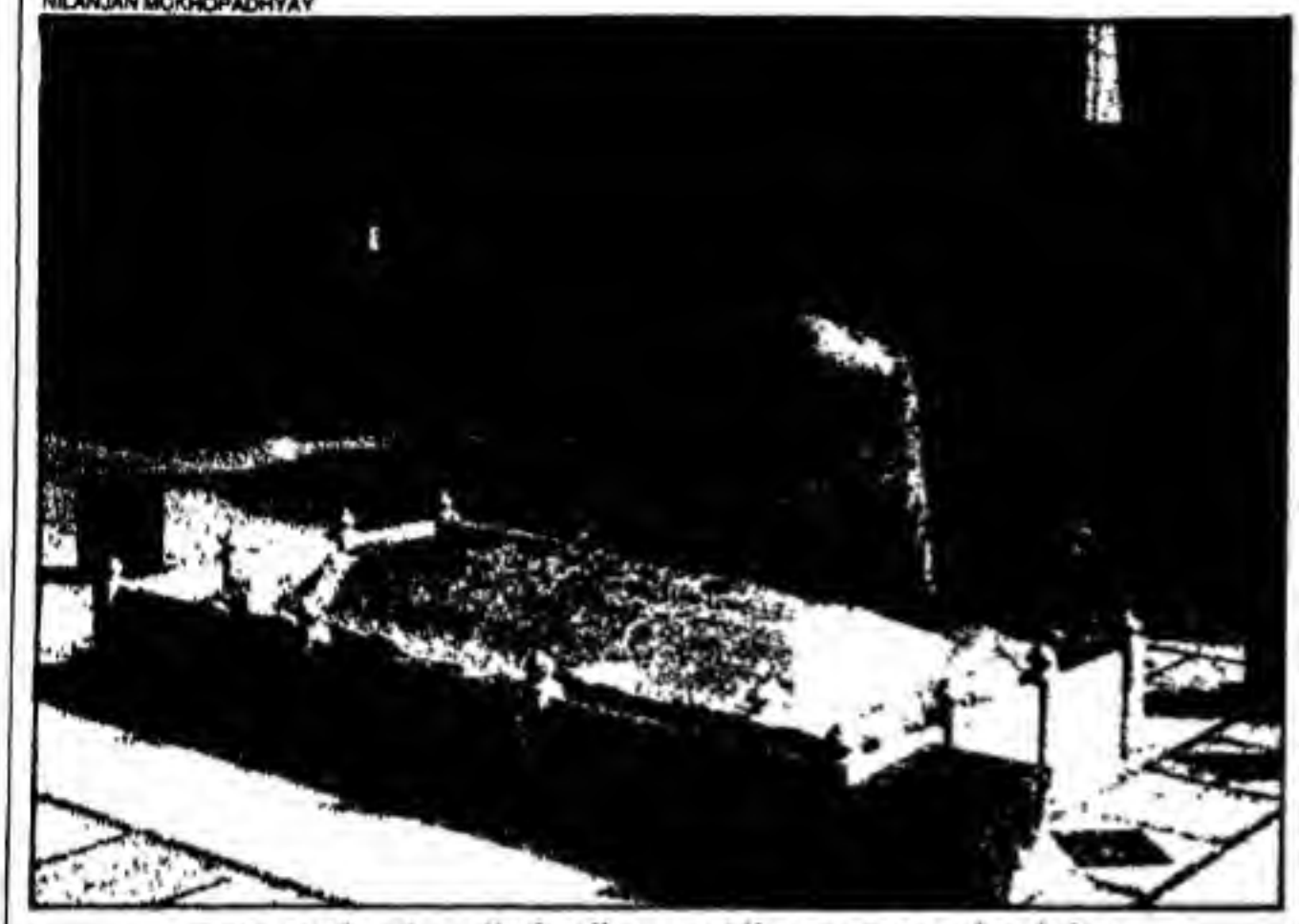
The emerging strategy of the *sangh parivar* is to negate India's composite spiritual tradition. The course of the Pirana dispute will determine whether it will succeed

where there is a near total breakdown of ties between the Muslims and Hindus within the sect.

Not only is the polarisation sharp to the point of being hostile, but the Hindu Satyapanthis have abandoned the common spiritual heritage and are increasingly linking Imam Shah with the more conservative *sanatani* tradition of Hinduism.

The change in the character of the *dargah* of Pirana Pir started from the time

NILANJAN MUKHOPADHYAY



A woman devotee offering flowers at the *mazar*: secular shrine

The sect's spiritual base drew elements from all religions. But now the polarisation is so sharp that the Hindu Satyapanthis have abandoned the common heritage

the present *kaka*, Krishan Das, took up the reins in the late Eighties. Das does not deny that he is a life member of the VHP and has played an "important role" in the Ram temple campaign. Within a couple of years of being elevated as *kaka*, he started tampering with the spiritual foundations of Satyapanth by drawing support from the other six Hindu members of the governing council.

Using his majority position in the council, Das first changed the name of the *dargah* to Pirana Peeth. Later, the old literature which traced the origins of the *panth* to Imam Shah's discomfort with Islam and his attempt to integrate elements of other religions were abandoned and a more 'Hinduised' interpretation of the sect was released.

The booklet that is now officially handed over to every visitor to the shrine says that Imam Shah was a "pure practitioner and advocate of *shudh bahmatva* and *adi sanatan Hindu dharma*." Das no longer calls himself *kaka* but has assumed the title of Acharya and suffixes his name with Maharajji.

In the early Eighties, as the Ayodhya movement gathered storm and Das played a significant role in generating support for the agitation from Gujarat, the Pirana Dargah saw several additions to its structures.

A new building was constructed adjacent to the old shrine and the interiors of the building were decorated with garishly coloured frescos. Visuals from *Ram Katha* and other Hindu mythological accounts dominated the additions to the old shrine.

A VHP demonstration: Hindu militants

DESHA KALYAN CHOWDHURY

In a more blatant move to prove their control over the *dargah*, the Hindu Satyapanthis painted the walls of the old *dargah* with large '*Om*' signs in red. The Muslim followers of the sect see it is as a blatant abuse of power.

As these changes were made in the nature of the sect, the Muslims in the council could do little beyond preparing dissent notes which were never officially recorded. Finally, in an attempt to stop further 'Hinduisation' of the secular sect, the Muslim members led by Hussain moved the local court in Ahmedabad. The judge ruled in their favour and ordered, among other things:

- Status quo in regard to the name of the *dargah*.

- Detailed inventory of the *dargah's* properties.

- Appointment of a receiver to manage the affairs of the shrine.

However, as it happens in most judicial disputes, the Hindu Satyapanthis went in appeal to the district court in 1992 which promptly turned down the appointment of a receiver and handed control to Krishan Das and his associates.

Since then, Das and his group have become more aggressive and now physically prevent Muslim Satyapanthis from entering the *dargah*. Though Das does not wish to be photographed, he agrees to talk briefly and to any query all he says is that he's doing what "Imam Sahab Maharaj would have wanted me to do".

For all practical purposes, the takeover of the Pirana Dargah by the VHP is almost complete. However, VHP leaders in Ahmedabad say that the organisation is not directly involved though some of its key leaders are.

The Muslim members of the council are a despondent lot. Hussain says that the "experience of the legal dispute over Babri Masjid has made us realise that we should not expect any justice from the judiciary".

Whatever direction the controversy takes, there are several signals to the emerging strategy of the *sangh parivar* in negating the composite spiritual tradition. The course of the Pirana dispute will determine the fate of every shrine which has followers cutting across religious lines. •

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay/Pirana

"The BJP is prejudiced against me"

Romesh Bhandari on why he resigned as the UP Governor

UP Governor Romesh Bhandari's 70th birthday will coincide with Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee's vote-of-confidence on the floor of the House on 29 March. But Bhandari will not celebrate his birthday at his official residence. Because he resigned from his office on 16 March.

It was an eventful tenture for Bhandari, but the outgoing Governor has no regrets. And as he awaited the arrival of his successor Mohammad Shafi Qurai-shi to take charge as the interim-Governor, Bhandari spoke to SUNDAY. *Excerpts:*

SUNDAY: Barely ten days back you said 'why must I resign?'. And here you are all set to pack your bags. What changed your mind?
Romesh Bhandari: It's very simple. Now you are going to have a government at the Centre which has neither faith nor confidence in me. Then, what is the point in sticking around. When you find you do not enjoy the confidence of a government at the Centre, you ought to step down.

Q: But the BJP has been demanding your resignation for quite sometime?
A: Well, the difference lies in the fact that so far it was the state government or the party's national leaders who were demanding it. It was on the same lines as Chenna Reddy's resignation being sought by Jayalalitha while she headed the Tamil Nadu government. But Chenna Reddy never stepped down. In fact, had it not been for UP's peculiar circumstances, I wouldn't have resigned.

Q: What is so peculiar about the circumstances here?
A: You see, the BJP here was an aggrieved party, which thought I was against them, and that isn't true. Now, the country's PM will be a BJP leader who had gone to the extent of sitting on a fast unto death to press his demand for my ouster. Therefore, it is my moral duty to step down.

Q: You mean to say that you were actually scared of being sacked?
A: I don't mean that.

Q: Why is it that relationship between you and the BJP has been sour right from the day one?
A: That's a misnomer. All was fine until the Assembly election results came out. They got strained only after I refused to swear-in a BJP government because they couldn't muster up a majority support in the UP Assembly. They failed to show that they had a support of more than 174 MLAs in the 425 member House. Thereafter, I became their target for no rhyme or reason.

Q: So you are not prejudiced against the BJP?
A: Certainly not. Rather, BJP is prejudiced against me. Now tell me how was I wrong by not swearing-in Kalyan Singh without the majority support, when the President of India too had refused to invite A.B. Vajpayee to form the government, until the BJP provided sufficient evidence to prove its majority in the Lok Sabha.

Q: Who do you blame for all the flak you have drawn during your tenure as the UP Governor?
A: That's what I will elaborately spell out in my book, *The Murkier Side Of UP*.

"Now, you are going to have a government at the Centre which has neither faith nor confidence in me. Then, what is the point in sticking around. After all, if you do not enjoy the confidence of a government, you ought to step down"

Q: And what is the murkier side of UP?
A: That is: what exactly goes on behind the *holier than thou* facade of many politicians here. I will expose the double standards of such politicians. My book will be a reference for constitutional experts because I will explain the rationale behind my actions that were labelled as controversial. •

Interviewed by Sharat Pradhan/Lucknow

Return to the **Dynasty**

LOOKING BACK

Jawaharlal, Indira, Sanjay, Rajiv...and now Sonia Gandhi

They were like obedient school-boys, sitting quietly it neat rows of chairs, each with a bouquet of flowers — waiting for Madam to appear. No one spoke or even whispered. Maybe that was because each one was feeling more foolish than the other. And yet, they sat and waited, and waited.

This was no classroom. And these were not school-boys, but full-grown members of Parliament who had reduced themselves to this — merely because Sonia Gandhi had taken over as the Congress party president. The minute they heard that she would be coming to the party office, Congressmen rushed to welcome her.

They were then told that instead of crowding around her, they should sit in an organised manner in the room where the party spokesperson briefs the press. And wait for Sonia to finish meeting the working committee. After which they could welcome her.

And that is exactly what Congressmen, as old and distinguished as Shivraj Patil, M.L. Fotedar and Balram Jhakhar ended up doing. An unabashed Mani Shankar Aiyar also hotfooted it to the Congress office and announced that he had returned to the party, as he took a chair in the last row. Others there ranged from the likes of Salman Khurshid, Praful Patel, Priya Ranjan Das Munshi, P.C. Chacko to Subbiramni Reddy.

"What to do?" said one. "If everyone is here trying to show their loyalty, then I can't be left behind."

So intense was the race for the loyalty stakes, that the minute some MPs realised that others had brought along bouquets of flowers, they made frantic calls on their cellphones. And soon various drivers rushed in carrying the

required flowers, so that *sahib* would not be found wanting by Madam

Can flowers buy you plum party posts?

Sonia's anointment as party chief was an event that was just waiting to happen. Ever since Rajiv Gandhi's death in May 1991, Congressmen had been begging and pleading with her to take over — just as they did with Rajiv Gandhi after his mother's assassination in 1984.

At that time too, Sonia was against Rajiv's taking over as Congress president. But there was little she could do, as she lost her husband — first to the party, then to allegations of corruption and, finally, to the suicide bomber in Sriperumbudur.

So when Congressmen turned up at 10 Janpath in the aftermath of Rajiv's assassination — and placed their caps at her feet — it was with a strong sense of *deja vu* that she refused to take up the vacancy her husband's death had just created. Her priorities were her children, the probe into her husband's death and the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation.

She was simply not interested in politics.

SONIA WITH DAUGHTER PRIYANKA

PEOPLE SHE LISTENS TO

Sonia's personal advisers

PRIYANKA GANDHI: If there is one person Sonia listens to, it is her daughter. It was Priyanka who helped Sonia with her speeches during the campaign trail.

V. GEORGE: The visible face of 10 Janpath. All her appointments are routed through him. In fact, most politicians are content to just visit 10 Janpath and meet George. Before Sonia took over, George was the bridge between her and the party.

RAJIV DESAI: As president of IPAN, his PR firm advised Sonia during her campaign trail. In the past two months, he has emerged as a regular at 10 Janpath.

Rajiv Desai

Suman Dubey

PULOK CHATTERJEE: The IAS officer from UP has been on deputation as secretary of the RGF for the last five years. Apart from advising her about the Foundation, Pulok has in the past accompanied her on trips to Amethi. He was part of the entourage when Sonia Gandhi took on Narasimha Rao when she complained about the delay in the Jain Commission probe in August 1995.

SUMAN DUBEY: A Doon School buddy who quit his job with *The Indian Express* to help Rajiv after he became Prime Minister. Later, after Rajiv's death, Suman became one of the trustees of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. Sonia has kept up with both Suman and his wife Manju.

THE INNER CIRCLE

Sources close to 10 Janpath

Jitendra Prasada

JITENDRA PRASADA: The vice-president is back to his old role of playing political secretary to a member of the Gandhi family. It is Prasada whom Sonia summons when she has to discuss a party matter.

ARJUN SINGH: The Thakur has bounced back, despite his humiliating defeat at the polls. He is now trying for a Rajya Sabha nomination from MP. His good friend V. George will help him get it.

Natwar Singh

NATWAR SINGH: Not only did he defy his critics by winning a Lok Sabha seat, he was also one of the few whom Sonia *did* ask for help to write out her campaign speeches. He was one of the two politicians whom Sonia invited to Priyanka's wedding.

SHEILA DIXIT: The other invitee. It was at Sonia's behest that Dixit was given the ticket from East Delhi. Just after the elections, when a private TV channel claimed that Sonia had made little difference to the Congress' fortunes, it was Dixit who defended her on television.

M.L. FOTEDAR: He left the Congress(I) along with Arjun Singh and N.D. Tiwari to form the Congress(T) in protest against the way Narasimha Rao had treated him, The Family and the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case. And he kept telling his colleagues that they had Sonia's backing. Imagine his chagrin when Sonia did not turn up at the Talkatora Road convention of the parallel Congress, conveying that she'd rather not support factionalism in the party.

Sheila Dixit

GHULAM NABI AZAD: No one is quite sure how he does it, but he always ends up as the man close to the Congress president — whoever that may be. And so it is with Sonia Gandhi.

AHMED PATEL: The poker-faced Patel has been working very hard. It was he who initiated the move to make Sonia Gandhi Congress president. It is, of course, ironic that Kesri trusted him almost as much as Sonia does now. He had made him treasurer of the party.

But Congressmen persisted. To them, 10 Janpath was the charm that always worked when all else failed. How could they let go now?

Soon, a pattern began to emerge. Everytime a section of the Congress wanted to get rid of a party president it did not want, Congressmen would rush to Sonia Gandhi and ask her to take over. She would refuse. After this, a coterie of Congressmen such as Satish Sharma, Arjun Singh, M.L. Fotedar and Ghulam Nabi Azad, to name a few, would go around stating that they had met Madam. She had refused. But instead she had indicated that so-and-so was her candidate for the job.

Since Madam would not contradict, these so-called loyalists would then proclaim that her silence was, in fact, consent, and then carry on. This is exactly how Narasimha Rao got the top job in the aftermath of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. At no time did Sonia ever say that Rao was her candidate for the job. That she was not in favour of the other contender, Sharad Pawar (sounds familiar?), taking over.

But here's the catch. Never did she say that Rao was *not* her candidate for the job. Similarly, in 1998, she never once indicated that she did *not* want the Congress to withdraw support on the Jain Commission issue or, later, that Manmohan Singh was *not* her candidate for Prime Minister.

What is the use of telling friends later on that she did not want the country to go in for mid-term polls, or that she does not really have a preference for the party's prime ministerial candidate? All that was needed was a simple press release, issued on 10 Janpath's letterhead. Instead, she said nothing. Her silence was left open to interpretation; and open to the likes of Arjun Singh to twist it any way they wanted to.

Will all this change now?

Although it's early days yet, there are already indications of a softer and more accessible Sonia. During the election campaign, she was criticised by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for exercising power without responsibility. "Why doesn't she meet the press?" asked BJP leaders.

Let alone the press, she was also not accessible to Congressmen. When the former UP Congress chief, N.D. Tiwari brought in a *padyatra* to Delhi in November last year, it was rumoured that Sonia Gandhi would be there at the party office

DESPERATELY SEEKING SONIA

The men who are trying too hard

H.K.L. Bhagat

K. KARUNAKARAN: He went to play Holi with Madam. Only, Sonia Gandhi didn't quite relish the prospect and slammed the door on his face. No matter. Karunakaran put colour on the door and came away. Being a step away from God is as good as the *darshan* itself.

H.K.L. BHAGAT: He hired a band from Karol Bagh, distributed laddoos and even danced outside 10 Janpath on Sonia Gandhi's birthday. So what if he is 80 years old and can barely walk? He needed a ticket for the Lok Sabha polls, and he'd dance for it if he had to. But this didn't work and he was left all alone, facing the music two months later.

K. Karunakaran

to welcome him. Congressmen of all shapes and sizes gathered at the party office to welcome her—as she welcomed Tiwari. The *yatra* arrived; so did the likes of Sitaram Kesri, Jitendra Prasada, Arjun Singh, Ghulam Nabi Azad; and, later, so did V. George, the visible face of 10 Janpath.

But Madam did not come. Instead, George brought a message that "due to security reasons" Sonia would not be coming over to the party office.

So much has changed in just three months. When she took over as party president, Sonia did manage to overcome security threats and drive over to the party office. Later, she broke another precedent and went to call on Sitaram Kesri. Until now, it was always Congressmen who called on 10 Janpath. And not the other way round.

But that was then. When she was just Rajiv Gandhi's widow. Now she is the Congress party chief.

Unfortunately for Sonia, the events that preceded her taking over as party chief could not have been to her liking. Although she had indicated that she was now willing to play a more active role in party affairs (Sonia-speak for I-am-now-ready-to-topple-Kesri), she had also indicated she would like the process to be a smooth one. "She would have preferred to take over a couple of weeks after the new government was sworn in," said a Sonia loyalist. "And, of course, she would have preferred to let Kesri go in grace, rather than to grab the post from his hands."

REACTIONS

RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE

"When senior leaders say that it is Sonia alone who can save the country, I consider this to be an insult not only to a 112-year-old party but the country as well. This reflects the bankruptcy of leadership within the Congress"

MANI SHANKAR AIYAR: What does one say about Aiyar that hasn't been said before? Just a week ago, he called himself a *dhobi ka kutta, na ghar ka na ghat ka*. He dissociated himself from the Congress in a huff after Kesri botched up the alliance with Jayalalitha. And Sonia announced the impending active politics one week later. Though upset that Madam hadn't thought it fit to take him into confidence about her plans, he decided to forgive and forget. And has now come back to the Congress without waiting for an invitation.

ARJUN SINGH: While the party was still debating whether to withdraw support on the Jain Commission issue, a mini-van was doing the rounds outside 10 Janpath and the Congress office. Loud, garish posters pasted on the van proclaimed that the villains of the piece were Narasimha Rao and Chandra Swami. The heroes were, of course, a youthful-looking Rajiv Gandhi, Indira and Arjun Singh (a smallish picture). Mournful music blared from the speakers: *'Pata nahin kahan gaya Rajiv Gandhi banner'*. The contraption had a name: Arjun Rath.

Later, when Sonia Gandhi took over as party president, the van was back. Only the music took on a joyful note and it had posters of Sonia Gandhi.

Mani Shankar Aiyar

Arjun Singh

LALOO YADAV

"Why would I not accept Sonia Gandhi's leadership? Is she not the daughter of this country?"

JYOTI BASU

"I wish Ms Gandhi good luck. She is the last hope for a faction-ridden Congress"

But then, this is not the way Congressmen play politics. Once the likes of Ahmed Patel, A.K. Antony and Ghulam Nabi Azad realised that Sonia was ready to assume leadership, they began badgering Kesri to resign. Kesri agreed; but left a loophole. At a press conference on 9 March, he announced his intention to resign in Sonia's favour.

When an eager Sharad Pawar called on him that evening, Kesri informed him that he had not yet resigned. He would do so, but only after he called an AICC session. And when would that happen?

Sometime soon, said Kesri. But refused to name a date.

A furious Pawar then met the others. A decision was taken to pre-empt Kesri at the working committee meeting the next day and pass a resolution announcing his resignation and asking Sonia to take over. However, minutes before the meeting began, Sonia met Madhavrao Scindia, A.K. Antony and Ahmed Patel. She told them that she did not want to force the issue and give the impression of being someone who wanted to grab power.

So, Kesri was left alone. In what party spokesperson V.N. Gadgil called the shortest working committee meeting in the history of the party, the CWC members did not raise the issue of party presidentship.

Later, Kesri met Sonia. "*Maine takeover ki baat kari, aur unhone ichha jahir kari* (I asked her if she wanted to take over, and she said yes)," he told reporters later. "But

BACK HOME TO A GANDHI

Will Sonia persuade them to return?

MANI SHANKAR AIYAR: He doesn't need an invitation. He's already back.

MAMATA BANERJEE: She says the mandate of the people supported her move away from the Congress. Sonia had tried to placate Mamata, but she had gone ahead with her plans. And, with the panchayat elections coming up in the state, Mamata is in no hurry to return.

R. KUMARAMANGALAM: Not only has he

R. Kumaramangalam

P. Chidambaram

Kesri had assured her that he would resign by the 13th," said a working committee member. "When he did not, we had to take the necessary steps."

Which is why when the working committee met again on the 14th morning, ostensibly to discuss the party's decision to stake claim to form a government at the Centre, the CWC members had already come prepared with the resolution they were hoping to pass at the earlier CWC meet. All the working committee members signed the resolution asking Kesri to step down so that Sonia could take over.

The list included even those who, until a day ago, had been regarded by Kesri as his inner coterie, such as Meira Kumar, R K. Dhawan, Madhavrao Scindia and even Pranab Mukherjee (incidentally, it was Mukherjee who had drafted the resolution as he announced proudly in front of television cameras — this was the same Mukherjee whom Kesri had nominated to the CWC in May last year, just because he was such a help in drafting letters). The only one who did not betray the former party president was his friend from Bihar days, Tariq Anwar.

That evening, before Sonia entered the Congress party office, Kesri had a press conference at his house. It was a brilliant move on his part. With a sad smile on his face, he told the press that, of course, he was ready to resign. Hadn't he said so to the press himself? But not like this. "I owe an explanation to the AICC members who elected me in good faith, so I would like to resign in front of them," he said. "They (the CWC members) said *'jaldi bulaiye'* so I said *'pressure mat uthaiye'; phir unhone kaha, 'abhi bulaiye'*," said Kesri.

"After that I left because I am not in a mood to fight," he said. "As far as I am concerned, I am still the Congress president. Sonia's nomination is unconstitutional. It is incorrect because I have not yet resigned."

Thereby, effectively implying that Sonia was in such a hurry to grab power that she could not even wait until he had resigned. Who was it who had called him an old man in a hurry?

SONIA AND SITARAM KESRI

G.K. Moopanar

Suresh Kalmadi

left the party, but he's even started appearing on television defending Advani-ji and Atalji. It seems as if Rajiv Gandhi's buddy has found a place for himself in the BJP.

G.K. MOOPANAR: If he'd been in the Congress, there is little doubt that he would have been Sonia's candidate for PM. The minute Sonia took over, he was asked if he was returning to the party. The same query was put by so many reporters that the normally-taciturn Moopanar snapped: "Don't you have any other question to ask me?"

P. CHIDAMBARAM: Sonia Gandhi still listens to him on matters concerning the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. But Chidambaram is not in any hurry to return to the Congress.

SURESH KALMADI: He would like to come back, only he hasn't figured out quite how to go about it.

REACTIONS

JAYALALITHA

"I don't think Sonia Gandhi is a politician. Her taking over as party president is a tragedy. Can an Indian ever become the PM of Italy?"

MAMATA BANERJEE

"How can we go back to the Congress just because Sonia has joined the party? We were thrown out of the party"

RAJIB BASU

But if Kesri knew how to play on the public mood, so did Sonia. Immediately after she had read out the CWC resolution asking her to take over ("Do I have to read this aloud?" she asked with a hesitant smile), she went over to Kesri's residence in Purana Quila Road.

The gesture worked. Kesri immediately burst into tears and let himself be gently led out by Sonia, who did not know what else to do. "*Ab mere upar bahut pressure hai*, I can't oppose her," he complained bitterly. Two days later, it was Kesri who proposed Sonia's name as chairperson of the Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP). After her speech, when Sonia walked around the hall and met each MP individually, she made sure that Kesri walked with her. Only, of course, the old man had some difficulty in keeping up with her brisk walk.

After she had effectively *managed* Kesri, Sonia knew that she had to deal with Pawar.

Once the Maratha realised how well he had done in the Lok Sabha polls — and how badly such rivals as Arjun Singh, N.D. Tiwari and even Jitendra Prasada had done — he decided that it was now time that the party gave him his due. If not Prime Minister, then the very least he deserved was Leader of Opposition. At least, that was the way the Maratha saw things.

But he was shrewd enough to realise that in Sonia's Congress, there was little chance of him ever becoming PM.

HOME TRUTH

Amethi says no to proxy rule

Sanjay Singh managed to achieve the impossible. On the face of it, he defeated Satish Sharma, a Rajiv stooge. But the fact remains that it was a devastating blow to Sonia Gandhi whose rally in Amethi had given the much-desired boost to her nationwide campaign to salvage the political fortunes of the Congress.

It is an open secret that Satish Sharma was detested in Amethi. But it was difficult to believe that the voters would reject him outright. After all, he was the 10 Janpath nominee. As a constituent put it: "It was the common perception that the people of Amethi would not reject even a dog nominated by the Rajiv household. So Satish Sharma remained overconfident of his victory. He not only had the seal of 10 Janpath with him, he had also tried to woo the people of Amethi by doling out petrol pumps, gas agencies as well as domestic gas connections to all and sundry."

"I would have won anyway," was Sharma's refrain, even after Sonia Gandhi kicked off her election campaign from Amethi. "Perhaps her visit would make some difference to my margin of victory."

When Sharma had first set foot in Amethi, he would go around saying: "I have come with the '*kharam*' of Rajiv Gandhi

Satish Sharma

He had already been told by 'sources close to 10 Janpath' that one of the reasons why Sonia advocated a stint in the Opposition was that she did not trust Pawar enough to make him Prime Minister.

So Pawar let go of that dream, and worked on the other — what he thought — more realistic one. That of taking over as CPP leader.

For this he needed Sonia's sanction. And went out of his way to get it. He was one of the first to credit Sonia for his performance in Maharashtra; he soon became a regular at 10 Janpath, entreating Madam to take over (as party president only) and forcing Kesri to step down. When reporters would ask him if he had met Sonia yet, he would snap back "many times". Pawar loyalists went out of the way to ensure MPs that things were now alright between 'Madam and Sir'.

But the charade fooled no one, least of all Pawar. A day after Sonia took over as party chief, Pawar hinted at the fact that Sonia might also be nominated as CPP chairperson. In response to a question, he said that the post could go to a non-member of Parliament also. "It has happened in the past with Indira Gandhi," he said.

However, he did not give up hope. When asked if he was a front-runner, he would say, "Why not?"

He got his answer on the morning of 16 March, a few hours before the CPP meeting. Sonia Gandhi called both Jitendra Prasada and Sharad Pawar to 10 Janpath, the now de facto party headquarters. She asked Prasada to change the party constitution whereby a non-member of Parliament could take over as CPP chairperson. She then told

and I am here only as a substitute for the Rajiv household." Sonia would reinforce his claims by making the occasional trip there with Priyanka, to let the people know that she was around.

Her forays into Amethi remained confined to organising medical and health camps and distributing clothes to the poor. But there was nobody to listen to the real woes of the people: industries pushed ahead by Rajiv Gandhi with huge government subsidies had closed shop, leaving thousands unemployed; high-tech establishments like the pipeline technology institute set up by the ministry of petroleum (under Sharma) failed to provide any kind of respite to the unskilled locals; and industrial pockets for small-scale units in different Assembly segments of the Amethi parliamentary constituency remained non-starters.

Just as the frequency of Sonia's visits to Amethi was reduced so was her accessibility to the electorate over the years. People could have audience either with her staff at 10 Janpath or make a beeline for Sharma's office, where entry was even more difficult.

The grassroots unit of the Congress party in Amethi became defunct and while Sonia relied on Sharma to take care of the needful, the latter had little time to attend to mundane party affairs.

With all her good intentions for the simple villagefolk of her late husband's constituency, where more than PM he remained the adorable 'Rajiv Bhaiyya', Sonia could not keep the emotional chords intact. The reason: people would not accept the family's proxy any more. •

Sharat Pradhan/Lucknow

Pawar that though she was not keen on taking over as CPP leader, there was a keen contest for the post. To avoid dissent within the party, she was taking over as CPP chief. Pawar would be made floor leader, but in actuality he would function as the Leader of Opposition.

All this sounded very reassuring, but Pawar was a seasoned politician. In effect, all that he had got out of the whole deal was his old job back as floor leader of the Lok Sabha. He was not really the Leader of Opposition. And neither was he the party's prime ministerial-candidate-in-waiting. In other words, when the time came for the party to stake claim, it would be Pawar who would have to wheel and deal the numbers, but it would be Sonia Gandhi or a person of her choice (this time Pawar did not even bother to hope) who would get the job.

But there was precious little he could do—except smile and thank her.

Now that Sonia has taken over both the top jobs, the charm has begun to wear thin. Already Congressmen are complaining about her inaccessibility. "We could meet Kesri any time we wanted to," said one. "Now, we have to ring up and ask for an appointment. And then wait for the phone to ring," he added.

In the same breath, Sonia is talking of greater transparency within the party. She would like to strengthen the grassroots. There would also be some changes in the party's organisational structure, she said in response to a question.

The changes, of course, would begin with the general secretary level. Kesri loyalists such as Meira Kumar, R.K. Dhawan and Tariq Anwar could be replaced. As would those working committee members who had been nominated by Kesri. But that is something that is not unusual to Sonia Gandhi. Every new president brings in his/her own people.

Unfortunately for Sonia, one of her 'own people' Arjun Singh has already begun claiming that the job of working president is but an announcement away. Barely an hour after Kesri announced his intention to resign on 9 March, Sharad Pawar had already begun worrying that Sonia might appoint his rival, Arjun Singh, as working president. This fear strengthened after Sonia gave tickets to Lok Sabha losers such as Santosh Mohan Dev and Oscar Fernandes. Calls from Bhopal informed him that Arjun Singh's nomination to the Rajya Sabha from Madhya Pradesh would follow in May. (Just a few days ago, Pawar had told his friends that it was not the party's policy to nominate Lok Sabha losers to the Rajya Sabha. But that was before Sonia took over.)

Now things have changed. Even before she took over as party chief, it was Sonia who decided that the party should not give tickets to those charge-sheeted in the 1984 riots, that the Congress should not stake claim to form the government, that the CPP leader should be one who could take on the BJP's Atal Behari Vajpayee—both in political savvy and stature.

A lot has changed since the days when all that she wanted of the Congress was to punish those responsible for her husband's death. The Jain Commission was not even a footnote on her list of 'Things to do' that she read at the CPP meeting.

In political terms, she has grown from being Rajiv Gandhi's widow to Rajiv Gandhi's successor. •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

REACTIONS

RAJESH PILOT

"I'm happy that she's taken over as party president, but I hope she won't surround herself with sycophants"

VENKAIAH NAIDU

"The Congress is essentially a crowd around a family. And we have seen what difference Sonia Gandhi has made despite her active campaigning in Uttar Pradesh!"

HANGING

Urea scam accused Prabhakar Rao earns a breather. But the ED still hopes to nail him

The almost forgotten issue of the urea scam took an interesting turn recently when Justice Bayyapa Reddy of the Andhra Pradesh High Court dismissed the petition of P.V. Prabhakar Rao, the youngest son of former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, for anticipatory bail against the summons of the Enforcement Directorate on 11 March challenging the non-bailable warrant and the criminal case against him by the agency.

Only a month back, Justice J. Chalameswar of the same High Court had described the fears of Prabhakar Rao as "imaginary and illusory", while rejecting the petition for his second anticipatory bail on 9 February.

Judge Chalameswar had looked into the contentious issue of the urea scam that had drowned the political fortunes of Narasimha Rao as he was edged out of the party presidentship in August 1997 and also deprived of a ticket for the 1998 Lok Sabha elections. And he had been convinced by the proceedings of the Central Bureau of Investigation which was investigating the case.

The CBI had filed a charge sheet on December 1997 against 13 persons but had not said anything about Prabhakar Rao. According to the charge sheet, "No evidence is available against other persons in the FIR and therefore their names have been kept in C.O.2 of the charge sheet and they have been cited as witnesses in the case."

However, what had been a routine investigation of the CBI after it even let off the alleged prime accused like Prakash Yadav, Sanjeeva Rao, Anand Mohan and Sambashiv Rao after 60 days in custody become a hot property for the Enforcement Directorate after the political shake-out in Delhi.

The ED in Hyderabad has been active ever since the former Prime Minister became a "commoner". The ED shot off its first salvo against Prabhakar Rao in October 1997 and issued summons to him to appear in Delhi.

"We felt something foul as the ED had not bothered to summon him when he was sheltered under the anticipatory

"I wrote to the ED on each of the summons. I did not abscond. How could I when I have the SPG trailing me?" said Prabhakar Rao

FIRE

bail till August 1997 though the agency had every right to do so," says Rao's counsel. The ED moved after the anticipatory bail was set aside by the Supreme Court on 5 August, 1997.

The proceedings against Prabhakar Rao and the precipitated action against his father worked like clockwork. The government agencies launched a manhunt against Prabhakar Rao with renewed vigour after the Supreme Court gave them a free hand. Rao reported sick with cardiac illness when the ED first summoned him in October 1997.

Prabhakar Rao says that he had not appeared before the ED in response to the summons under Section 40 of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act as the ED had in the past arrested Sambashiv Rao, Sanjeeva Rao, Anand Mohan and Mallesham Gowd under that pretext. They were let off without a charge sheet after being in custody for 60 days.

The next summons from the ED came on 27 January and 2 February, 1998. The second one was pasted on the door on his Jubilee Hills residence as if he was an habitual absconder. Rao says that he had replied to each of the summons stating that ill health had restrained him from appearing in person. "I wrote to the ED on each of the summons. I did not abscond. How could I when I have the SPG trailing me?" he told SUNDAY.

The ED had been waiting in the wings through all of February till the end of the elections. It shot into action once again as media reports focused on the possibility of a BJP-led government at the Centre.

It was at this stage that the AP High Court dismissed Prabhakar Rao's petition for a second anticipatory bail on the ground that his apprehension of arrest by the ED was only "imaginary". The court based its argument on the statement of the central government's standing counsel that "there was no crime registered against the petitioner (Prabhakar Rao)".

The ED moved the Economic Offences Court at Hyderabad on 5 March. The sworn statement by the chief enforcement officer, R.K.S. Nim, gave a different picture of the situation saying that Prabhakar Rao was "deliberately" avoiding the ED and its summons. "The ED had wrongly represented the facts to procure a non-bailable warrant against Prabhakar Rao as if he was a smuggler or a criminal on the run," says his advocate.

When the ED tried to execute the warrant through the state police, Rao played truant. He was not available at his own residence or that of his relatives and advocates. The city police stated that they had once traced him up to his farmhouse in Patancheru, a Hyderabad suburb and lost track later.

Once his petition was rejected by the High Court, Rao appeared before the Economic Offences Court on the same afternoon and presented his case. Taking note of the fact that he had written three letters in reply to each of the ED summons — which the court felt was not "disclosed" by the agency — Justice Bhaskar of the EOC cancelled the non-bailable warrant. The judge also urged the police to return the warrant and allowed Prabhakar Rao to appear before the court on 1 April. That foiled the ED's plan to put Rao behind bars.

Prabhakar Rao's counsel contends that the ED has no case against him except for an "incriminating statement" by Anand Mohan, a business partner of Sanjeeva Rao in the urea deal. "But Anand Mohan, who had given the statement under duress in September 1996, had appeared before a court in Delhi on the same day of his release and retracted his statement," says the lawyer.

JAGDISH YADAV

The proceedings against Prabhakar Rao and the action against Narasimha Rao worked like clockwork. The agencies launched a manhunt against Prabhakar after the Supreme Court gave them a free hand

Now the officials of both the investigative agencies are tongue-tied over the outcome of the case. The ED, which has made the alleged FERA violations by Rao's family members a national issue, is not prepared to go back to Delhi with an empty hand. It is keeping its fingers crossed for the outcome on 1 April. •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

MAJ. GEN. ASHOK K. MEHTA

BRAVEHEARTS

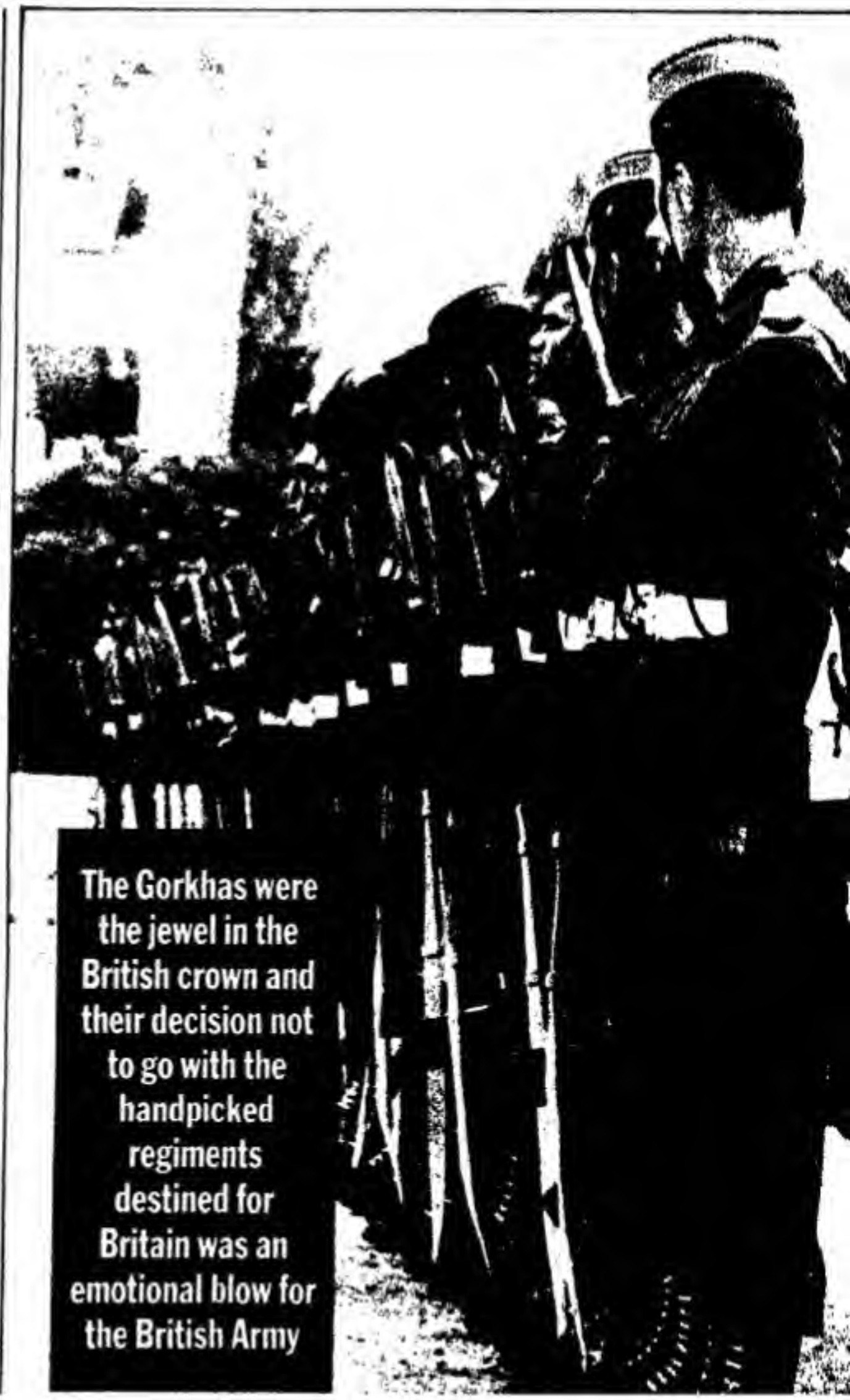
What do Manisha Koirala and the Gorkha units of the Indian Army have in common — both love India as much as their own country

The golden jubilee of India's Independence is also the golden jubilee year of some army units, notably the Gorkhas. At the time of Partition, British Indian Army was divided between Pakistan and India and the Gorkhas who were officered solely by the British were also divided between Britain and India according to a tripartite agreement they signed with Nepal in November 1947.

This agreement decreed the transfer of four regiments — 2, 6, 7 and 10 — Gorkhas of eight battalions to the British Army and the remaining six regiments — 1, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9 — Gorkhas of twelve battalions to the Indian Army. Men from these regiments were given the choice of opting for either India or Britain. It is the Gorkhas earmarked for the British Army who chose to remain in the Indian Army that are celebrating the golden jubilee of their new incarnation, much like the Sikh and other Hindu companies shed by the Muslim-predominant regiments like Punjab, Baluch and Frontier Force Rifles, which joined Indian regiments. In the Sikh regiment, 16, 17 and 18 Sikh battalions were raised on this account and are also 50 years young this year.

The story of the Gurkhas — deanglicised to Gorkha on joining the Indian Army — is colourful. The British were totally shattered when from the four regiments they had chosen, which included both the eastern regiments of 7 and 10 Gorkhas, there were numerous dropouts, so large the Indian Army could raise additional battalions from them. These Gorkhas were the jewel in the British crown and their decision not to go with the handpicked regiments destined for Britain was an irreparable emotional and psychological blow for the British Army.

The main reason why Gorkhas stayed back was war fatigue, four long years overseas, difficulties at home and



The Gorkhas were the jewel in the British crown and their decision not to go with the handpicked regiments destined for Britain was an emotional blow for the British Army

the easier access to Nepal and leave from India. Two Indian officers transferred to the Gorkhas — Colonel H.S. Chauhan and Major S.C. Singa — played a big part in shepherding and fitting these non-optees with their new Indian Army Gorkha identity.

Chauhan was in Lucknow this New Year's day in the 11 Gorkha Rifles (GR) regimental centre, being proudly called the father of the regiment, born out of Gorkhas from 7 and 10 GR who chose to stay on in India. Almost all of 2/7 GR once commanded at Shillong in 1937 by Field Marshal Bill Slim, refused to go to England. Its Indian avatar was christened as 3/11 GR while 4/11 GR derived from a mix of 7 and 10 GR. They were to become the pathfinders of the Kiranti Force of 11 GR. Their home at the time of raising was below the Dhauladhar range in Himachal Pradesh. The regiment and its 3rd battalion celebrated their 50 years with well-attended reunions in Lucknow and Sharanpur.

Others who scored the golden jubilee are Gorkhas from 2 and 6 GR which resulted in the making of 6/8 GR and 6/5 GR from 2/6 GR. At the time of Independence, the latter was allotted to the British Army and was on duty at the Governor-General's residence at Delhi and billeted at Anand Parbat. On Christmas Day 1947, the Gorkhas were asked to exercise their option: whether to go to England or to stay back in Delhi. Singa was sent to Mathura where 2/1 allotted to India was located to pick up the half-a-dozen or so from 2/6 GR expected to drop out and remain with the Indian Army.

When Singa reached Anand Parbat, he learnt that 90 per cent of the battalion had decided to join the Indian Army Gorkhas. The problem of raising units in excess of the Indian Army quota prescribed by the tripartite agreement was circumvented on the suggestion of the then Nepalese Ambassador in Delhi that there was a provision for reactivating any of the wartime battalions.

Therefore, on 5 February 1948, orders to raise another battalion of 5 GR were received, just days after the battalion had organised Mahatma Gandhi's funeral ceremony at Raj Ghat and helped in collecting his ashes. So was born 6/5 GR. And 50 years on, it had moved a full circle: returned to Delhi for its birthday.

Singa was back too with no signs or sense of fading. So were nearly all the past 20 commanding officers, hundreds of Gorkhas and their families from Nepal, other officers from the battalion and the regiment and three former 6 Gorkha British officers posted in the High Commission at Delhi.

The highlight of the three day celebrations was the memorial service and the audio-visual presentation of the battalion's life and times. Three officers — all 2nd lieutenants, one JCO and 39 Gorkhas — sacrificed their lives in Naga hills, 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars and on Siachen glaciers. Its list of gallantry awards for a young battalion is most impressive.

The battalion has 66 names in its hall of fame of second and third generation soldiers in service of the battalion. At the top of this list is the present commanding officer, Col Harsh Kaul, born in Red Fort, the first child of the battalion. His father joined the battalion one month after its formation as its first second-in-command.

The centrepiece of the celebrations was the Golden Jubilee cup, a spectacular trophy in silver and gold, presented to the battalion by the battalion. This was the star attraction for all soldiers that is till *bahini* (sister) Manisha Koirala made a surprise appearance at the audio-visual show.

Manisha, a grand niece of former Prime Minister G.P. Koirala, did a *vini, vidi, vici*. Speaking to the battalion she said: "I'm honoured to be present here at, the golden jubilee celebrations of GR (FF). History has known the Gorkhalis to be the finest fighting force in the world and I'm certain they will continue to do so in the future."

Breaking into Nepali she continued: "Seeing you in such a big gathering I feel as if I am back home in my own country. My country and I should be proud of you." For the Gorkhas of 6/5 GR and many others on Rashtrapati Mahodaya's service in India, the words of Manisha Koirala were as stirring as those of Singa, the founding father of the battalion: "Let no one forget these brave soldiers from Nepal fight for the integrity and well-being of our country."

Nepal can provide no better credentials of its bonafides. •

(The author was a general officer commanding of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force in southern Sri Lanka. He is also a founder member of the Defence Planning Staff of the Chiefs of Staff Committee)

HE'S BACK

After last year's ignominious defeat, Kamal Nath makes a surprise comeback

Eighteen years ago, Indira Gandhi took Kamal Nath to Chhindwara, a constituency bordering Nagpur, in Madhya Pradesh, "*Yeh mera teesra beta hai, aur aapko isko jitana hai* (He is my third son and you must see that he wins)," she told the credulous voters.

She could not have found a safer seat for her younger son's best friend. Chhindwara had always returned a Congress candidate to the Lok Sabha, even in 1977 when the entire state voted against the Congress. And that's how it went, until last year when the people of the constituency decided that they'd had enough of Nath and his helicopter and gave their mandate to the BJP's Sunderlal Patwa.

No matter. A seemingly chastened Nath went back to his voters, hands folded, with a suitably repentant smile instead of his usual smug look: and guess how many fell for this act? Four lakh seven thousand people. He won by a margin of a lakh and 53,000 votes, the largest in the state.

The smirk was back, so was Kamal Nath. And how!

Immediately after the Lok Sabha results started trickling in, Nath was one of the first to take a categorical stand on the party's decision to sit in the Opposition. As is typical of Nath, this was even before the party had made up its mind. In fact, at that time Sharad Pawar, fresh from his victory in Maharashtra, was arguing that the party should stake its claim to form the government.

But for once, Nath took the moral high ground. "We don't have the mandate," he said on television. "The party is in no hurry to grab power," he added. And even managed to look sincere for the cameras. With Chhindwara under his belt, he could afford to.

And in the days that followed, he was everywhere. Whether it was Star News, Zee TV or Doordarshan, it had him explaining the party's stand on issues as diverse as a) whether it should stake claim or not, b) what Sonia Gandhi meant to the Congress, c) whether the BJP would be able to form a stable government and d) whether the Congress thought it would rain the next day or not.

If he was not on television, then he was either visiting 10 Janpath ("Of course, I can't tell you what Sonia Gandhi said,") or else offering Sitaram Kesri unsolicited advice ('I think you should resign and let Sonia Gandhi take over).' It was Nath whom Pawar took along to make sure that Kesri had indeed resigned after his first press conference announcing his intention to do so.

Two years ago, Nath went from being an MP to the husband of an MP. In the by-elections last year, by forcing his wife to resign, he lost even that identity

An energetic Nath bounced out of the car and rushed to Kesri and said, "Congratulations." A bemused Kesri stared back at him and asked, "Why?" "Because, you said you'd resign and you kept your word," said Nath, popping a chewing gum in his mouth. "But I have not," said Kesri, effectively bursting Nath's bubble.

At least Pawar got his answer.

In Sonia Gandhi's Congress, Nath will play a greater role than he did when Kesri called the shots. He is one of the few Congressmen who has access to 10 Janpath. Also, he is on good terms with the second-rung leadership such as it is from Sharad Pawar, Jitendra Prasada to perhaps even his former mentor Arjun Singh (though Singh himself is not quite clear whether Nath is on his side).

But the comeback has taken some time. Two years ago, Kamal Nath went from being a member of Parliament to the husband of a member of Parliament (his wife Alka contested from Chhindwara when Narasimha Rao denied tickets to all those chargesheeted in the *hawala* case). In the by-elections last year, when Nath forced his wife to resign, he lost even that identity. To add to all his woes, he was now perceived as anti-women: a charge that his Doon School buddies in Delhi found a little hard to swallow.

However, last December when all the MPs were looking gloomy at the prospect of another election, Nath's was the only smiling face seen at the Congress office. "But don't let my narrow interests determine your policies," he said with his usual smirk. "Of course, we must do what we can to avoid an election," he added.

Nath had reason to crack such schoolboy jokes. While Patwa had spent the last year basking in the front benches of the Lok Sabha, Nath had been working hard in his constituency.

The Gandhi family may have lost Amethi, but at least it managed to win back Chhindwara. •

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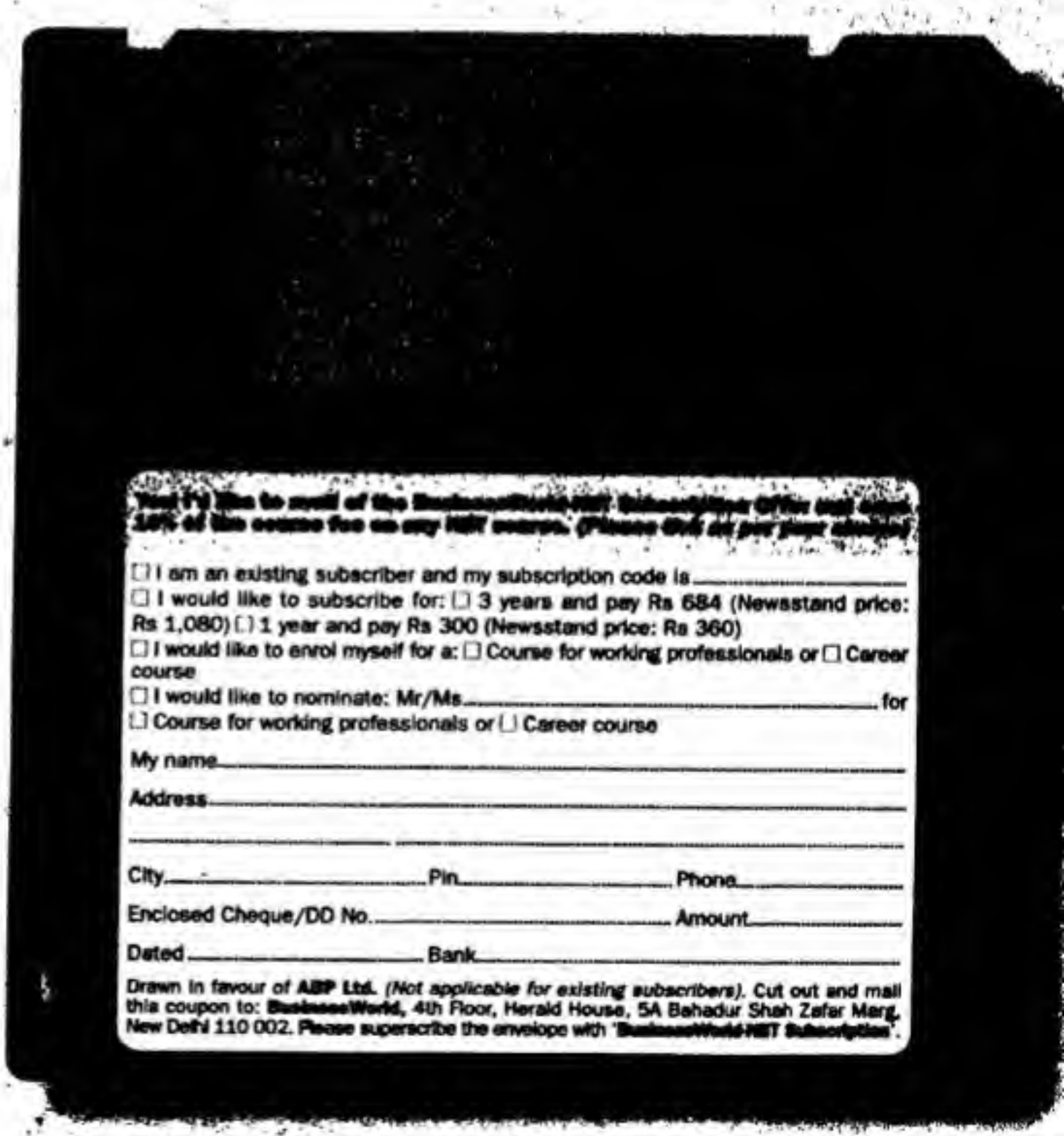

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A handful of people have been invited to an exhibition of designer clothes. They gather at the venue, take their places along with some photographers and maybe a television crew, crane their necks to see who else has or hasn't been invited, and wait impatiently for the action to begin.

Lights are dimmed, the music piped up and the models pour out of the wings to show their stuff: 'traditional' *salwaar kameezes* with 'traditional' heavy embroidery, lengths of fabric wrapped every which way to symbolise the sari. Highly original contraptions on the head, feathers for a tail.

Another fashion show. Photographs of the evening appear in a few newspapers. Magazines, hungry for colourful events to fill up their pages, devote double spreads. But while all the publicity is most welcome for the designer, wasn't the real idea behind the show lost somewhere? How many of the outfits displayed and priced so exorbitantly actually got sold? Hardly any.

Behind all the glitz and glamour of the Indian fashion industry lies this harsh reality. Notching up sales of a mere Rs 55 crore annually, fashion pundits have delivered the verdict—haute couture has failed to take off in India.

The fashion fraternity wants us to "have a heart": they are so new in the field. Which is fair enough, considering India was placed on the fashion map a little more than a decade ago, when Rohit Khosla launched his line and gave the country its first designer tag. The National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) came along around the same time as did Ensemble, India's first exclusive fashion store set up in Bombay by Tarun Tahiliani who came armed with a business degree from Wharton. Ritu Kumar (who has dressed many a Miss Universe/Miss World aspirant since) became a popular name and the society fat cats fought for the distinction of wearing Kumar's label.

All in all, during this period, the first major step towards creating an awareness had been taken and the stage seemed set for a fashion revolution in the country. In expectation of bigger things, the wheels of the fashion industry were set in motion. Only, the revolution never came.

Students, however, are flocking to fashion schools (NIFT, Delhi, alone has 400 passing out every year). Result: there's a glut of young designers who, upon graduation, find little work. They are eventually lapped up by big export houses. Some open small boutiques of their own which soon fail to keep up with market economics.

But industry people refuse to buy this argument. "Things have changed from the time when nobody considered fashion designing to be a choice of profession," says Suneet Varma. Agrees another successful name in Indian fashion, Ashish Soni: "Till about seven years back, there were only 40-50 people who passed out from a fashion institute. The numbers have swollen over the years. The industry has expanded, there is more variety, employers can pick and choose, and the number of institutes have also increased. You have MNCs like Reebok and Nike picking up fresh graduates, something which was not happening earlier."

Fine, but why is there a dearth of new lines then? Surely, increase in the number of lines indicate growth in the market volume? There is no wholistic fashion houses, like Armani or Chanel in the West. An attempt at launching a 'complete lifestyle' was made by J.J. Valaya when he opened shop with J.J. Valaya Life in Chattarpur. But such examples are hard to come by.

"These things take time all over the world. Mere launching of lines is no indicator of creativity. There's lots more to it—marketability, merchandising and entrepreneurial capabilities," coun-

Off THE RACK

A dearth of buyers is fast reducing India's fashion business to a cottage industry

A [illegible] CREATION

Rina DHAKA

Ashish SONI

FASHIONSPEAK

Haute Couture

• High-fashion outfits, meant only for those with deep pockets.

Pret Line

• Reasonable (?), within the range of Rs 2,000-Rs 5,000. Displays the designer's concern for those wanting to move up in life.

Fall-Winter Collection

• Time to bring out your best Pashminas, gorge on kebabs and watch models who are dressed minimally.

Spring-Autumn Collection

• Heady cocktails, cool dresses and opulent designs with heavy embroidery, but in organza.

Western Outfits

• Strapless silks and minis which cling to the body through sheer will power.

Ethnic Designs

• Rich embroidery, brocades, silks — never mind the season.

ters Ashish Soni.

And this is precisely where the Indian fashion industry loses out. "Ours is not an organised business — there is no corporate backing, we have no knowledge as to how to market our products, we have to do our own publicity, organise and finance our shows," says designer Jatin Kochhar. Concurs Valaya, "There is no guild of designers, so no one takes us seriously. A guild would have given us a forum to air our views. Also, there is no corporate or governmental backing. The result is there's a common complaint in the industry today. Corporate houses are no longer interested in financing fashion shows. And why should they, asks Tahiliani. "The sponsors need to make sure that their products are branded well and get exposure. In terms of this, the returns have not been substantial. Moreover, given the recession in the industry, why should any firm offer financial backing?"

This is also the reason cited for so few affordable, ready-to-wear lines. "To produce in bulk, we need streamlined production, retailing and marketing capabilities which is not possible without corporate backing. You have Singhania backing Louis Feraud but he will never cooperate with a Rohit Bal or a J.J. Valaya," says Valaya.

But then, from the perspective of the corporate world, backing a designer does not reflect good business sense. The costs work out to be more than the profits. At a rough estimate, the cost of producing a designer costume is nothing less than Rs 25,000-Rs 30,000. Multiply this with the

IT'S A STEAL!

It defies all mathematical logic. The system is haphazard, typifying the bizarre world of fashion. And the naive client pays the price.

- **Rs 1 lakh on say 600 metres of 'special' fabric (actually they can make do with one-fourth of it, but creativity needs experimentation)**
- **Rs 10,000 on tailors (they have to be grooomed specially for the job. And expertise never comes cheap)**
- **Rs 25,000 on special accessories — buttons, beads, sequins etc.**
- **Rs 5 lakh on two fashion shows a year (in swanky locales, at least two known models)**
- **Rs 10,000 to woo the media**
- **Rs 5,000 on books and magazines (designers need them for reference. They have to be in touch)**

What you are actually paying for when you buy a designer outfit

J.J. **VALAYA**

"When you buy a painting, you don't ask the painter the cost of the canvas. There are certain intangible costs which need to be covered"

Tarun **TAHILIANI**

"Women in India prefer saris, so where is the need for fashion stores? How many go to these stores to actually shop?"

volume and you have a figure which could knock out a well-to-do business house. It displays business acumen, instead, to back a winning horse — an international label like Louis Feraud.

Corporate backing does not necessarily augur well for the designer industry either. In most cases, financial assistance from the business houses means that it is their brand image which has to be endorsed. Like when Ritu Beri designed a summer collection of footwear for M'escos and sportswear in association with Ajay Bijli for an international fitness firm, it was the product image which got enhanced rather than the designer's creativity.

What makes the scene even bleaker is the dearth of fashion stores in the country. You have Vama in Bombay, Ffolio in Bangalore and Ogaan, Carma and Ensemble in Delhi. Critics point out that rows and rows of clothes are gathering dust and they, in fact, prefer stocking big brands like Reebok and Nike.

Rina Dhaka complains that at the fashion shows, none of the buyers turn up. "You do not have people coming from, say, Ffolio to inspect our products and place an order." Tahiliani is more candid and perhaps nearer the truth when he declares that India does not need fashion stores. "There is no *fashion* in our country. Women here prefer saris, so where is the need for them? How many go to these stores to actually shop?"

In a country like India, where the choice of clothes is dictated by festivals and seasons, a piece of designerwear is forever. Valaya agrees: "Here, fashion does not change radically. Therefore, clothes that you buy today should be the kind which can be passed on to the next generation."

Yet another problem dogging the industry is the lack of organisation within it. Little thought is given to planning and presentation, working patterns are erratic (a case in point is Ashish Soni who often goes into hibernation after a showing of his latest collection). "In terms of presentation and marketability, I would give it a 4 out of 10," says

Suneet **VARMA**

"This is my tenth year in the business, and at this point, the most important thing is to keep oneself alive"

Kochhar.

With the future being uncertain, making a quick buck makes good sense. As Suneet Varma says, "This is my tenth year in the business, and at this point, the most important thing is to keep oneself alive." So you often have unrealistically-priced outfits.

To this, the designers argue that creativity comes for a price. But given the limited disposable income of most Indians, do we need such high-priced stuff? Is the covering of costs of producing an exclusive outfit a genuine argument or mere eyewash?

"When you buy a painting, you do not ask the painter the cost of the canvas," says Valaya. "There are certain intangible costs which need to be covered — expenditure on holding shows, marketing the outfits and other such."

Wouldn't producing *en masse* bring good money? Not many designers are in favour of *pret* lines though verbal accolades are mouthed in their favour. You have Beri admitting that "wearable and adaptable clothes attract major audience". Ravi Bajaj is working on a *pret* line and promises to channelise his creative energies to this area. But the reality is that barring Kochhar, no other top-of-the-rung designer has been keen on reasonable pricing. And then, this has earned him the dubious title of being a *sadakchhap* designer. Which means, his clothes afford easy and economical multiplication.

Some designers feel that mass production would curtail their creativity. Asks Rohit Bal (who had once, with a wave of his hand, dismissed fat women as unfit to be dressed by him): "Who wants to make clothes for the masses when it can't give me creative satisfaction?"

But doesn't this same creativity take a back-seat when it comes to sizeable returns, which is why successful designers, such as Dhaka, Gitanjali Kashyap and David Abraham are tying up with export houses or tapping the overseas market on their own? "I export only what I design for the domestic market," says Tahiliani. This is true of Valaya as well. He does not send very large consignments, taking as much time over each piece as he would for a special client back home. But most others are far busier notting up big figures in foreign exchange.

And why not. After all, the bottomline is the kind of turnover you can manage to show. And in this sense, the players are still very small. An industry estimate puts the total business generated by the top ten at a conservative Rs 100 crore. Which, given the stakes and buyers involved, is meagre. Which also makes India's fashion industry no better than a cottage industry.

Rohit **BAL**

"Who wants to make clothes for the masses when it can't give me creative satisfaction?"

Ritu **BERI**

Designers are trying to expand into design-related areas. Beri, for example, designs for special causes like 'People For Animals'

A fact which designers have realised and, hence, are trying to expand into design-related areas: you have interiors by Varma and Valaya, designs by Beri for special causes like 'People For Animals'. And, of course, survival on personal contacts and hype.

So for the present, at least, the writing is on the wall: the Great Designer Upsurge, an event promised over a decade ago, has come a cropper. But the arc-lights have not been switched off. More young designers are crowding in every day with dreams of shaking up the fashion industry, while established ones are trying to figure out more original ways to keep their labels in circulation. So more models and more designs. And more fashion shows. •

Pallavi Ghosh/New Delhi

No love's labour

The Bhopal Hospital Trust runs into a storm for employing children

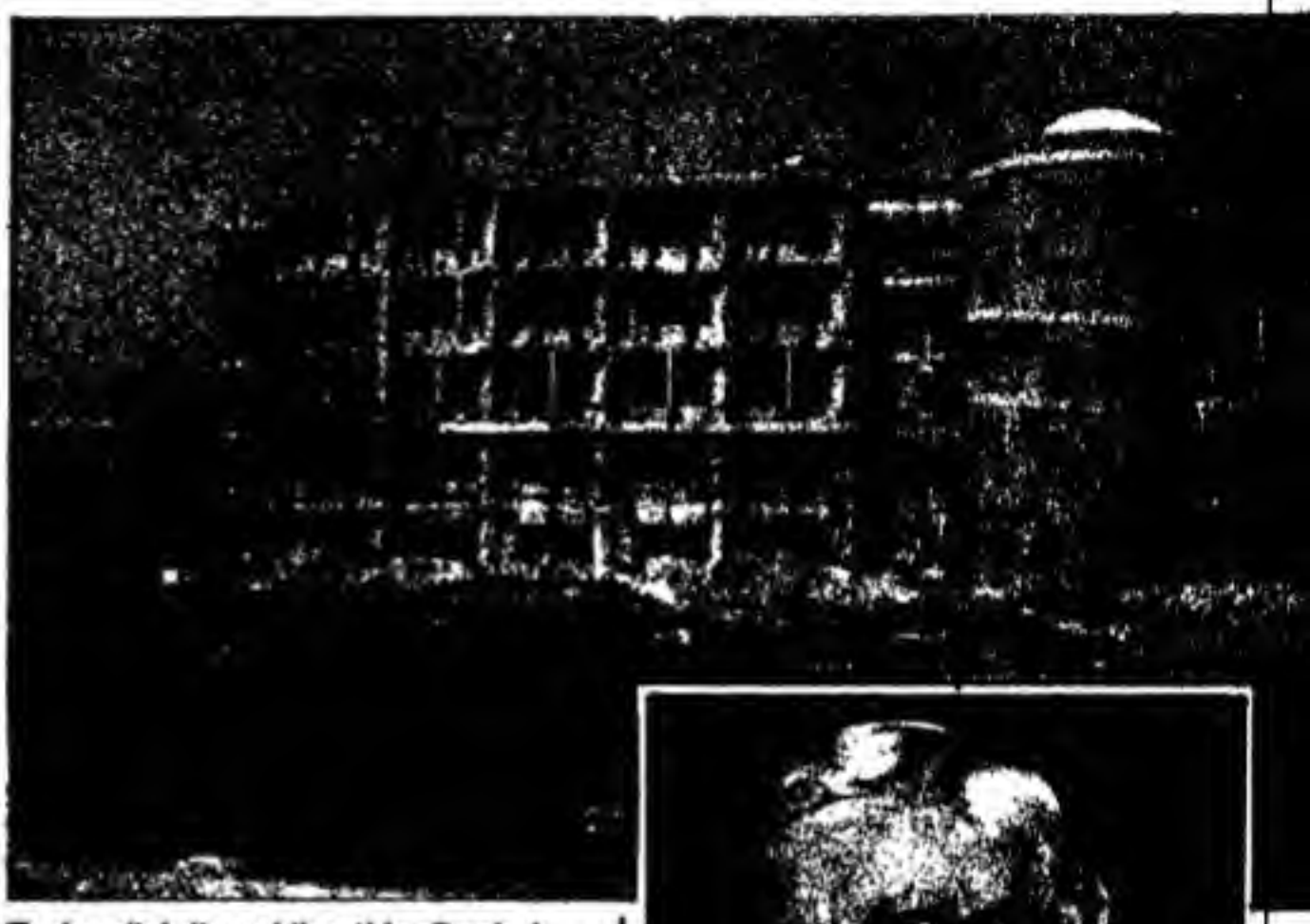
It was death by asphyxiation on the night of 2 December, 1984 as thousands in Bhopal succumbed to the lethal methyl isocyanate leaking from the Union Carbide gas plant. Carbide has since been embroiled in highly publicised legal wranglings over compensation packages. Now it's controversy yet again, this time with Sir Ian Percival, the sole trustee of the Bhopal Hospital Trust (BHT).

The allegations are serious. First came the charge that BHT was formed with Union Carbide's money and that Carbide was using the hospital, now under construction, to find a way out of the criminal responsibility for the gas tragedy. And now, alleges deputy labour commissioner R.G. Pandey, the BHT employs child labourers on its 80-acre site. "We saw as many as 14 child labourers," says Pandey. "But there were about 200 of them and they fled as the walkie-talkie-holding men manning the site spread the message."

According to Pandey, Percival has been issued a show-cause notice and asked to deposit Rs 20,000 as compensation for each of the 14 labourers within 15 days in the district child labour rehabilitation and welfare fund. Failure to pay would result in the issuance of a Revenue Recovery Certificate. The notice, issued with reference to the Child Labour (prohibition and regulation) Act, 1986 and a Supreme Court order dated 10 December, 1996, further says: "The action of launching prosecution can be taken against IRCON along with you as a principal employer."

BHT had given the contract of construction to Hospital Services Consultancy Corporation (HSCC) which in turn passed the contract to the Indian Railways Construction Company (IRCON). Both HSCC and IRCON are Government of India undertakings. The trust deed was signed in 1992.

BHT's main source of funds, allege survivors' organisations like the Bhopal Group for Information and Action (BGIA), Bhopal, and Bhopal Gas Peedit Sangharsh Sahayog Samiti (BGPSSS), New Delhi, is the value of Carbide's shares that had been judicially attached to ensure that its representatives face criminal charges related to the disaster. "Union Carbide has been able to get the shares disattached by means of intervention in the Supreme Court through Ian Percival, and continues to abscond justice." Sir Percival, they further allege, was working for Union Carbide as he was working for Sidley and Austin, the law firm which worked for the company between 1984 and 1992.



The hospital site and (inset) Ian Percival: house of controversy

"The money should have come from Carbide and not through the disattached shares," they charge. BGIA's Satinath Sarangi Sathyu even alleged that Percival had spent only Rs 7 crore on construction while five crore was spent on office expenses in the year 1995-96, including his fees.

Percival replied: "This is a personal attack on me. The Supreme Court ordered that I be allowed to take Rs 5 crore to England to cover administrative expenses of the trust." But the survivors' organisations remain unconvinced. They have challenged Percival's bonafides and his role in the BHT despite his argument that the Supreme Court had accepted his "independent" status in the trust.

But Percival's problem doesn't end here. The child labour controversy took a serious turn when Gulab, one of the child workers, fell from the fourth floor while working and died. The police has registered a case under section 304(A) of the IPC — that is, death due to negligence.

The BHT, it was alleged, was formed with Union Carbide's money and that Carbide was using it to find a way out of the criminal responsibility for the gas tragedy

As of now, the state labour department has decided to prosecute C.K. Nayar, regional manager IRCON who is also BHT site in-charge, Gyanesh Pandey, senior manager HSCC and Trilok Singh, a contractor. But these are just the administration's attempts to set its land in order. It's Percival who has a battle on his hands. •

Deshdeep Saxena/Bhopal

THE CLIMBDO

After all that farce, Jayalalitha finally sends the 'letter of support' to the BJP

Used to sycophancy and implicit obedience within her party, Jayalalitha, with 27 MPs in her control, expected that the BJP too would genuflect before her. It didn't work out that way

In Tamil Nadu politics, Jayalalitha has always been somewhat of an enigma. Imperious by nature, impervious to flak, she was projected as the *puratchi thalaivi* (revolutionary leader). Last fortnight, it was this enigma factor that nearly upset the BJP's calculations, as the AIADMK chief held Vajpayee and Co. — and by extension the nation — to ransom. For five nerve-wracking days, she refused to give the BJP the crucial 'letter of support' they needed to form the 12th Lok Sabha. Uncertainty gripped the country as Jayalalitha haggled for a more definite and decisive role in the new government.

Rajiv Gandhi had once told an aide that an alliance with Jayalalitha was like a "roller-coaster ride to nowhere". Even the taciturn and calculating Narasimha Rao could not keep pace with her fickle political manoeuvres and an over-sized ego. So just when the BJP thought that it was all fixed, Jayalalitha refused to play ball. The BJP would first have to agree to her demands — the 'letter of support' hinged on that.

Her demands were clearly outlined. Populist in tone, they were meant for popular consumption: implementation of the Cauvery Water Dispute Tribunal's interim award, nationalisation of all inter-state rivers, freedom for all states to fix their own levels of reservation, 33 per cent reservation for women and making all 19 languages in the Eighth Schedule, including Tamil, official languages.

She went a step ahead demanding that ex-Harvard professor Subramaniam Swamy be made the finance minister. She taunted the BJP, saying, "Is it a crime to seek a Cabinet post for my allies, Subramaniam Swamy and Vazhapadi Ramamurthy?" But the BJP wasn't all that amenable. And as they resisted her increasing demands, Jayalalitha began spewing venom on both Advani and Vajpayee. She accused them of having a "negative attitude" to her demands and ridiculed reports about her lobbying for the finance and law portfolios to wriggle out of corruption charges against her (*see box*). She pointed out that most of the cases against her had been filed by the DMK-led state government. The only case being probed by a central agency, the CBI, was about her receiving US$ 300,000 as birthday gift.

Jayalalitha also lashed out at another BJP ally, seasoned politico Ramakrishna Hegde. Criticising the newly-formed Lok Shakti chief of trying to "throw his weight around with only

WN

V. RAJAGOPAL

Jayalalitha with her coalition partners: psychology of a tie-up

three MPs", she accused Hegde of constantly interrupting her during the allies' meetings with the BJP leadership.

These were petty tantrums, and something that the BJP hadn't bargained for. Time was running out, and would it again be a case of so near but yet so far? But once the initial shock was absorbed, it was time for damage-control. So they sent Jaswant Singh, their ace troubleshooter, to Madras to soothe Jayalalitha's ruffled feathers.

In retrospect, all this seems a badly-

DEMAND DRAFT

Jayalalitha asks for her pound of flesh

SCORP NEWS

Jayalalitha made six demands and mainly for public consumption. They were:

- The implementation of the Cauvery Water Dispute Tribunal's interim award.
- Nationalisation of all inter-state rivers.
- Constitutional protection for 69 per cent reservation in Tamil Nadu.
- Freedom for all states to fix their own levels of reservation.
- Thirty-three per cent reservation for women.
- All 19 languages in the Eighth Schedule, including Tamil, to be made official.

The BJP is not in a position to implement most of these demands. If they try to implement the Cauvery water interim report, not only Hegde and his Lok Shakti but all BJP MPs from Karnataka are going to resign. And on the reservation issue, it would require a two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha to achieve the 69 per cent reservation in the state. While the male-dominated Indian Parliament is never going to accept 33 per cent reservation for women. The BJP has already shot it down.

But for Jayalalitha, all these demands concealed a 'hidden agenda' — the dismissal of the Karunanidhi government, getting Subramaniam Swamy the finance portfolio (because, then he could bail Sasikala and her clan out). Jayalalitha agrees that of all cases against her, the only one being probed by the CBI was the one where she received US$ 300,000 as birthday gift from an unknown source. So she argues that it is illogical to suggest that she had sought the finance portfolio to wriggle out of the case. She wanted it to spite one of her biggest detractors — P. Chidambaram. So she tried hard to sell the line that Swamy was a professor at Harvard. If Swamy had got the finance portfolio he would have found loopholes in various FERA violation cases registered against Sasikala and her nephews. Swamy had also promised to detect FERA violations in the various dealings of Kalanidhi Maran's Sun TV, the DMK mouthpiece. The finance portfolio would have been a handy and effective tool to silence political adversaries like Karunanidhi, Moopanar, and also to re-open the Indian Bank scam case.

If Vazhapadi Ramamurthy was given the law ministry, it could have influenced the various cases registered against her by the state government. As Karunanidhi puts it, "The letter drama enacted by Jayalalitha was nothing but the culmination of a political farce to wriggle out of a string of criminal cases."

As for the dismissal of the Karunanidhi government, the BJP would never take any hasty steps. Dismissal would have meant blatant abuse of power.

To some extent, Jayalalitha misread signals in Delhi. She believed that Vajpayee and Co. were so desperate for power that they would give in to whatever she said. So even while she was throwing her tantrums, it was really Sasikala who was putting pressure on Jayalalitha. Sasikala has four charges of FERA violations against her regarding the now-defunct JJ TV. Plus, there are seven similar cases against her nephews V. Bhaskaran, V. Dinakaran and Jayalalitha's foster son V. Sudhakaran. Jayalalitha is emotionally obliged to Sasikala who has spent two years in prison and still steadfastly refuses to say anything against her friend.

executed, and a rather tacky farce.

At one level, it's everything to do with her own self-important image. It's a kind of megalomania that she suffers from. Apparently, she had once written to the President of India that MGR had grown jealous of her popularity. Jayalalitha, so the story goes, had asked the President to make her the chief minister as MGR had become too ill to govern. After MGR's death, she tried to win public sympathy by accusing MGR's widow Janaki Ramachandran of trying to poison her "with a glass of butter milk".

It's the same Jayalalitha at work today. And what appears to have peeved her most was what she perceived as a genuine 'slight': the BJP's inability to regard her as more equal than other alliance partners. Used to sycophancy and implicit obedience within her party, Jayalalitha, with 27 MPs in her control, expected that the BJP, too, would genuflect before her.

Jaswant Singh : assuaged Jayalalitha's ego

It was nothing like that. At the BJP's 'national agenda' meeting there was no overt show of gratitude. Instead, Jayalalitha was constantly interrupted by people like George Fernandes and arch-foe Hegde. Said a senior — and a rather obsequious — AIADMK leader: "These BJP guys can't handle Amma. How can they allow 'cheepies' like Hegde and Fernandes to snigger at her. In the south, leaders of all parties are used to sycophancy. And people like Amma are worshipped."

The trouble with Jayalalitha is that once she smells the slightest advantage, she becomes arrogant and haughty. Shrewd by nature, she understands which persona she has to assume and when. So while her alliance with the BJP was being worked out, it was a meek and docile Jayalalitha, who was almost ready to be dictated.

But all that changed by the afternoon of 2 March when results of an AIADMK sweep started coming in. She told Sukumar Nambiar — a BJP state functionary who had interacted with her during the time of alliance — that she would prefer dealing with either Vajpayee or Advani! She even changed her cell phone number just to ensure that those who were negotiating with her earlier could not reach her. She hooked on to STAR News and after Mamata Banerjee announced that she would only lend outside support to the BJP, Jayalalitha took her cue. In a late-night faxed statement from her Poes Garden residence, she informed all major newspapers that she would give "unconditional" support but not join the Vajpayee government.

It was at this point that Sasikala, her friend and confidante, came into the picture. Unlike Jayalalitha who is facing the wrath of the Karunanidhi government with over 30 cases against her, Sasikala's problems are with the Enforcement Directorate which comes under the finance ministry's jurisdiction. Jayalalitha is emotionally obliged to Sasikala who spent nearly two years in

If Subramaniam Swamy was made the finance minister, Sasikala and her errant nephews could be bailed out of the several FERA violation cases against them

"Jayalalitha has climbed down because she has realised that the Congress is not in a position to form a government. There will be a definite dent in her vote bank as most people have seen through her game," says Cho Ramaswamy

jail but refused to spill the beans on her friend. Apparently, Karunanidhi had tried to work out a deal with her. If Sasikala turned approver, then with her disclosures, Jayalalitha could be packed off forever. But Sasikala remained loyal.

So if Subramaniam Swamy could be made the finance minister, this was Jayalalitha's chance to repay her debt. Sasikala and her errant nephews could then be bailed out of the several FERA violation cases against them. A bonus would be the law portfolio for Ramamurthy. The gameplan was simple: with 27 MPs, the AIADMK and its allies could form a pressure group within the BJP government. She thought that the BJP leadership was so desperate for power that they would give in to whatever demand she made — even going to the extent of dismissing the Karunanidhi government.

It didn't work out that way. So when Atal Behari Vajpayee went to meet the President *without* her support letter, Jayalalitha was stunned and furious. She had called her bluff, but it didn't work. The BJP would not be bullied, she realised. Now it was her turn to suggest a compromise formula. Both the media and public opinion were turning against her, and she stood to lose everything if she persisted with her tantrums.

So within 24 hours after she blasted the BJP, Jayalalitha did a volte-face by deciding to join the Vajpayee government and even going for the swearing-in. This sudden reversal came after her meeting with Jaswant Singh. Says Cho Ramaswamy, a political analyst and BJP supporter: "Jayalalitha has climbed down because she has realised that the Congress is not in a position to form a government. There will be a definite dent in her vote bank as most people have seen through her game."

Karunanidhi: the DMK chief tried to work out a deal with Sasikala to sink Jayalalitha

And so the U-turn, all grace and sweetness, but for how long? Once more it's Cho who hazards an answer. "Nobody can anticipate her moods," he says. "Her wounded pride will start working overtime and those joining hands with her are bound to get their fingers burnt." Not exactly a reassuring comment for the BJP.

But for all her caprice, Jayalalitha understood one thing clearly. This is the age of political defections and loyalty was naive and out-dated. She realised that there might come a time when even her own 18 MPs may switch sides along with the four PMK and three MDMK MPs. And that finally, she may be left with only Subramaniam Swamy and Vazhapadi Ramamurthy. Both Dr S. Ramdoss, the powerful PMK Cheif, and MDMK leader V. Gopalasamy are anti Subramaniam Swamy.

But the doubts linger. How long will this tenuous alliance last? It's a tricky question. Because, everything hinges on how the courts deal with Sasikala and her nephews. And how well Jayalalitha can use her political clout to extricate herself from the corruption charges against her. And more importantly, what moves will the shrewd and vindictive Karunanidhi make to cosy up to the BJP?

Right now, all these are just questions without answers. The next few months will be crucial, both for her and the rickety 17-party coalition that assumed power on 19 March. •

Sreedhar Pillai/Madras

Moving backwards

In future, Tamil Madu politics will be dictated by two powerful caste leaders: Dr S. Ramdoss and Dr K. Krishnasamy

The founder leader of the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu, E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar, must be turning in his grave. He never dreamt that his party would strike an alliance with a north Indian political outfit to win an election in the state. But how wrong he was. The 1998 Lok Sabha polls in Tamil Nadu will go down in history for the remarkable performance of a political alliance struck between Dravidian parties (the AIADMK-led front) and a pronounced north Indian political outfit (the BJP) which won 30 seats in the 12th Lok Sabha. But what must be most worrying for the political parties spawned by the Dravidian ideology like the DMK and the AIADMK is the emergence of the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) and Pudhiya Thamizhakam (PT) in this elections.

The message of 1998 Parliament elections for the major political parties in Tamil Nadu like the DMK, AIADMK and even national parties like Congress(I) and the BJP is that the ruling M. Karunanidhi-led DMK government will perhaps be the last of the single-party governments in the state. Because the poll results clearly show that the future state governments in Tamil Nadu will be coalitions. And in this, small but key political outfits such as the PMK and the PT will play an important role!

This time round, the PMK in the AIADMK-led front bagged four seats out of the five they contested. Realising their importance in the game of numbers, the BJP president L.K. Advani spread the red carpet out for its leader Dr S. Ramdoss. The PMK which is powerful in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu bordering Madras gained prominence when Dr S. Ramdoss in the mid-80s took on the then 'almighty' of Tamil Nadu politics, M.G. Ramachandran, on

Dr S. Ramdoss: protecting the interests of the Vanniars

the issue of reservations. Ever since then, Ramdoss' casteist PMK have been protecting the interests of the Vanniars, an intermediate backward class, which is also the single-largest community in the state.

Ramdoss has consistently pursued the Vanniyar interests. Initially, his party, the PMK, had been a political partner of the DMK. But the relationship between the two parties soured when Ramdoss realised that Karunanidhi was taking him for a ride. Since 1989, though Karunanidhi had used PMK's vote-bank in several electoral battles, Ramdoss was never rewarded once the polls were over. "Karunanidhi got our help in 1989 and 1991 polls, but he would not give us even three Assembly seats. In fact, Karunanidhi specialises in making false promises," said an angry Ramdoss.

So, finally fed up with Karunanidhi's machiavellian politics and TMC chief G.K. Moopanar (who wasn't even willing to give him a single seat in this election), Ramdoss switched sides when Jayalalitha offered him five Lok Sabha seats. "We were a deciding factor in at least 15 constituencies. So Amma (Jayalalitha) was intelligent to offer us five seats and that too in our citadels. And look, it has benefitted our partners," pointed out Ramdoss.

Jayalalitha had guaged the ground realities before the polls. No wonder, realising the political ramifications of an alliance with the PMK, the autocratic Jayalalitha has been deferential to Ramdoss. For instance, at the Tirunelveli AIADMK state meet where the grand alliance with the BJP was struck, Dr S. Ramdoss was given top billing by the AIADMK chief. A move that ultimately paid off.

But politics indeed make strange bedfellows. Or else, how can a man like Ramdoss — who has been all along praising Karl Marx, B.R. Ambedkar and Periyar; constantly berating the upper castes; lauding LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran; and projecting himself as the new leader of the entire Tamil community — reach an understanding with an autocrat like Jayalalitha and a predominantly upper caste party like the BJP. "Our survival was at stake and our recognition as a state party was our immediate priority. So we joined the alliance. But I still believe in my ideology and that the alliance with BJP will work."

Today, Ramdoss is a powerful politician in Tamil Nadu. And like TMC chief Moopanar, he draws his strength from being a kingmaker and getting a better deal for the Vanniars, who according to him are "the most backward of the backwards". What's more, like Jayalalitha, Ramdoss is also in a hurry to "dismiss the Karunanidhi government". No wonder, Ramdoss and the PMK have become a major threat to the DMK.

Dr K. Krishnasamy-led PT did not win a single seat in the 1998 polls. But he is now being wooed by both the DMK and the AIADMK for his immense influence over the Dalit vote-bank

Another potent force and the man to watch in Tamil Nadu's murky politics is Dr K. Krishnasamy and his Pudhiya Thamizhakam (PT). He did not win a single seat, but is now being wooed by both the DMK and the AIADMK. Because, Krishnasamy has immense influence over the Dalit vote-bank. And today, Krishnasamy is referred as the 'Kanshi Ram of Tamil Nadu'.

Karunanidhi and Jayalalitha: will face stiff challenge from the two caste leaders

The PT is actually the political outfit of the Devendrakula Vellalors Federation, a Dalit organisation which rose to prominence during the caste wars in southern Tamil Nadu. Krishnasamy, a practising doctor in Coimbatore, came into prominence when he took up the cause of the Dalits of Kodiyankulam who were ruthlessly beaten up by the cops during Jayalalitha's regime. Later in 1996, he was one of the few to win an Assembly election at the height of the DMK-TMC wave.

This time too, Krishnasamy played a crucial role. His party was instrumental in destroying the chances of the DMK-TMC combine candidates in at least eight constituencies in southern Tamil Nadu where they polled between 80,000 to 1,40,000 votes. For instance, Union minister M. Arunachalam lost to the AIADMK candidate by one lakh votes because Krishnasamy himself polled over 1,25,000 votes.

Similarly superstar Sharat Kumar, a DMK candidate from Tirunelveli, lost to the AIADMK, because the PT candidate polled over 80,000 votes. "Our vote-banks are strong and clear, it cannot be diluted by any factor. We are opposed to all political parties. Yet, in the present electoral set-up we may go in for an alliance," said a confident Krishnasamy.

Political analysts say that given Krishnasamy's political stand and the fact that Tirunelveli, Tuticorin, Sivakasi, and other southern districts are traditional AIADMK bastions, Karunanidhi will be his natural ally in the distant future. Further, Krishnasamy's hatred towards Jayalalitha — stemming from the fact that Thevars, who are the enemy number one of the Dalits have the backing of Jayalalitha (because Sasikala her close friend is a Thevar) — will also bring him closer to Karunanidhi.

So in the coming days of Tamil Nadu politics, both Ramdoss and Krishnasamy are going to play a crucial role in their own ways. "The days of the mainstream Dravidian parties are numbered. The caste-based parties will be dictating terms in the future," Said Rajagopal, a social scientist. "And it's almost certain that these two caste leaders would emerge as the most powerful players in Tamil Nadu's political scene in the next decade." •

Sreedhar Pillai/Madras

The numbers game

Himachal Pradesh and Meghalaya: minority Congress governments flunk their mathematics exams

While the eyes of the nation were transfixed on the drama at Delhi, two states played host to flip-flop parliamentary plays: Himachal Pradesh and Meghalaya.

With both states ending up with hung Houses, the respective Governors displayed text-book techniques to invite the single-largest parties (the Congress) to form the government. But in both cases, the numbers game tripped the incumbents.

In Meghalaya, the Assembly elections held on 16 February ended with the Congress securing 25 seats and the United Democratic Party (UDP) bagging 20 seats in the 60-member Assembly.

Meghalaya Governor M.M. Jacob was left with a tough decision to make in a very short time as the previous Assembly's five-year term was due to expire on 1 March. So, the swearing in of a new government was a constitutional necessity. The Governor called both the groups to determine their respective strengths in the House. Congress leader S.C. Marak assured M.M. Jacob that he had the support of six MLAs besides his own party's 25, thus totalling 31, an absolute majority. The United Democratic Party — comprising the Hill Peoples' Union (HPU), the Peoples Demand Implementation Committee (PDIC) and a section of the Hill State Peoples Democratic Party (HSPDP) — with 20 seats, staked claim by informing the Governor that they had the support of 11 more MLAs (including five Independents), taking their tally to 32.

But the Governor asked the UDP leaders to provide proof of their numbers in writing, which B.B. Lyngdoh failed to do. So, the Governor played it by the book (or rather the Sarkaria Commission), invited the leader of the single-largest party, S.C. Marak, to form the government and asked him to prove his majority on the floor of the Assembly before 12 March.

Marak and his five-member ministry were sworn in on 27 February. But the show had just begun. B.B. Lyngdoh and his MLAs walked out of the Raj Bhawan during the swearing-in ceremony, causing more than a flutter.

SANJIB BHATTACHARJEE

Ex-CM S.C. Marak (extreme left) on the Assembly premises: brief encounter

CM B.B. Lyngdoh: opportunistic

With Marak and his minority government walking the tightrope, Lyngdoh and his men then got together to give the CM the final push. The fate of the Marak ministry was sealed when the Congress' nominee for the Speaker's post lost out, 29-30, to the Opposition-backed candidate. The writing was on the wall and Salseng C. Marak chose not to turn a blind eye to it.

On 9 March, parliamentary affairs minister J.D. Rymbai sought an adjournment of the House for 30 minutes which was opposed by the leader of the Opposition, B.B. Lyngdoh. The newly-elected Speaker, E.K. Mowlong, rejected Rymbai's plea and asked S.C. Marak to move the motion of confidence. "We prefer not to move the motion," announced the parliamentary affairs minister. The CM then stood up to surrender: "I prefer not to move the confidence motion as we have failed to secure the required majority in the House."

The dramatic turnaround ended with B.B. Lyngdoh, leader of the United Parliamentary Forum (UPF), being sworn in as the next chief minister of Meghalaya on 10 March, just 12 days after Governor M.M. Jacob had sworn Salseng C. Marak in. The next day, the Governor administered the oath of office and secrecy to 26 new ministers.

Two days after the curtains came down on the Meghalaya muddle, the

Virbhadra Singh: photo finish

spotlight shifted to the Himachal House. As security forces lay a virtual siege to Shimla, the 68-member Himachal Pradesh Assembly braced for a bruising showdown: chief minister Virbhadra Singh's trial of strength.

On 6 March, Singh had been sworn in as head of a minority government, after the Congress had emerged as the single-largest party with 31 seats. The BJP bagged 28 seats, while former Union minister Sukh Ram's Himachal Vikas Congress (HVC) won four seats and an Independent candidate won one. Four Assembly seats remained vacant, with elections scheduled for later.

Governor V.S. Rama Devi had asked the CM to prove his majority before 16 March. And as the House convened on 12 March, the stage was set for a needle match on the floor of the House.

Anticipating trouble, the state administration swung into action. Policemen in riot-gear took up positions, barricades were put up all around, entry points were sealed and a prohibitory order under Section 144 CrPc was clamped on the Himachal capital.

But in the end, it all amounted to nothing. The BJP struck up a post-poll deal with the HVC. And two of the four HVC MPs quickly crossed over to the BJP. So, the BJP-HVC combine took its tally to 32. The Congress, with the support of the lone Independent, too, had 32.

With the two opposing camps tied at 32 in the 64-strong Assembly, the CM decided to end the stalemate in the "interest of the state and in keeping with the best democratic traditions". "I have decided to tender my resignation and that of my council of ministers forthwith," announced Virbhadra Singh. Pro-tem Speaker Thakur Ram Lal immediately adjourned the Assembly, *sine die*.

The ball was, thus, back in Governor V.S. Rama Devi's court. She accepted the resignation of Virbhadra Singh's six-day-old government, asked him to continue as CM till alternate arrangements were made, and dashed off a detailed report to President K.R. Narayanan. The Governor recommended the imposition of President's Rule in Himachal Pradesh as the formation of a stable government in the state "remained doubtful" and suggested that the Assembly be kept under suspended animation, till elections to four Assembly seats were held on 21 June. The new BJP-led Cabinet will decide on the issue of imposing President's Rule in Himachal Pradesh.

Ten days after Salseng C. Marak was outnumbered in Meghalaya, and seven days after Virbhadra Singh's minority government fell in Himachal Pradesh, Atal Behari Vajpayee took oath as India's 14th Prime Minister. As head of a 17-party coalition, he remains short of an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha. Looks like numerology is, indeed, the name of the game. •

Sumit Das Gupta/Calcutta and Dileep Chandan/Shillong

NO CONFIDENCE

Naga mass organisations oppose the S.C. Jamir government

The installation of a new Congress government, headed by S.C. Jamir, hasn't made influential segments of Naga society happy. The action committee of Naga Hoho, council of elders, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had appealed to Governor Om Prakash Sharma against swearing in the new government. According to them, "the vast majority of public had refrained from participating in the recently concluded... Assembly and parliamentary elections". The committee maintained that the boycott amounted to a clear rejection of the "imposed" election process, and the Congress, which won by default, had no business to rule.

The Naga Hoho and the NGOs along with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) had demanded that the polls be postponed till the Naga peace talks ended. Holding an election, when Nagaland's future was being discussed, amounted to fraud, they had claimed.

The committee had told the Governor soon after the elections were over that if he still chose to intall a government that really didn't have the people's mandate, then the Naga Hoho and all other social and voluntary organisations including those of students, women and churches would treat his decision "as the highest act of betraying people's trust in democracy and will resort to all kinds of protest/strikes and agitation".

S.C. Jamir being sworn in: thumbs down

Governor Sharma, however, ignored the appeal, and S.C. Jamir was sworn in as the chief minister of Nagaland, for another term, on 5 March.

Meanwhile, Isak Swu, chairman, NSCN (I-M), has in a press statement firmly scotched rumours that 'Major General' V.S. Atem had received Rs 10 crore from chief minister Jamir. Such allegations are being "actively spread by the anti-Naga ruffians", Swu said in defence of his general.

Swu also said that canards were being spread against Atem because the people had successfully boycotted the polls. The 'general' was one of the key persons in the boycott campaign. Swu appealed to the people not to be influenced by such "malicious" propaganda, which, he felt, was "prompted by the Devil Himself". •

Pradeep Parlikh/Kohima

In and out

Multinationals try to get a toehold in West Bengal as Indian industries leave the state

For West Bengal's investment-parched economy, 1998 is turning out to be a particularly harsh year. This is because a number of blue-chip companies are packing up — lock, stock and barrel — as they prepare to leave the state. Others are shifting their head offices to the more congenial environment of other Indian metros.

Tyre major Dunlop has suspended work in its Sahagunj factory, throwing 4,000 workers into uncertainty. Liquor major Shaw Wallace has shifted its head office to Bombay. Philips is shifting its colour television (CTV) production facility out of Salt Lake into Pune. State Bank of India is toying with the idea of shifting its foreign exchange operations to Bombay. Also preparing to fly out are ICI, Metal Box and a host of other companies.

While this is one side of the story, the other side — less frequently told — concerns a string of acquisitions and negotiations. Take the case of Indal. Senior executives in the company are locked in a battle to shoo off Sterlite Industries which is trying to acquire stakes. Alcan, Indal's Canadian parent, has joined the battle. The reason behind the winding up of Philips' CTV operations may be a sell-out to a Japanese company, a rumour Philips CEO K. Ramachandran "neither confirms nor denies".

Also making news is Haldia Petrochemicals Limited (HPL). American and Japanese megacorporations are interested in becoming stakeholders in the megaproject. Calcutta Chemicals has been sold off to Henkel. A number of Calcutta's top of the line companies seem to be poised for a change of ownership. And in most cases, possible new owners are American, Japanese and German corporations.

Are we in the middle of another round of change in the ethnic identity of West Bengal's industrial capital? Calcutta's emergence as Asia's boomtown in the late last century was fuelled by British capital, invested in jute and engineering industries. But it took little time and effort for this boom to go bust.

The Philips factory at Salt Lake: change of address ?

Calcutta's emergence as Asia's boomtown in the late last century was fuelled by British capital, invested in jute and engineering industries. But it took little time and effort for this boom to go bust

It is the workers who are invariably held responsible for the flight of capital from West Bengal. Critics maintain that strikes and disruptions are a matter of rule rather than exception here. Trade unions are militant and irresponsible; workers are only interested in their rights and not responsibilities. And the ruling political party — read the Leftists — have encouraged such disruptions, they assert.

In such a bleak scenario, factories have kept moving out, leaving behind a

vast pool of retrenched workers. Add to that the new entrants to the job market and the millions who came over since the Bangladesh war, and the recipe for disaster is complete. There is simply not enough work in the state to engage the teeming millions. There were around 5

TAPAN DAS

Durgapur Steel Plant: lost glory

lakh registered unemployed in 1978, a year after the CPI(M)-led Left Front took office. The number now stands at 56 lakh.

The state government appears to be

TALKING TERMS

[illegible]

[illegible] enormous possibilities of downstream linkages that ITC enjoys. Buying the company are American and Indonesian [illegible] companies.

CESC: The R.P. Goenka group company is locked in a battle of nerves with the Bengal government. Last year, the group had signed an MoU with Enron to explore the possibility of bringing natural gas [illegible] from Bangladesh and the [illegible] north-east. Rumours are rife that CESC is seeking an alliance with Enron.

[illegible]: The non-banking financial company has fallen foul of RBI's bad books and is rife with problems. Last year, the board was revamped, with leading professional managers joining it. J.P. Morgan, the financial MNC, is believed to be interested in the company. But promoters are said to be resisting any change in the ownership structure.

FLIGHT PATH

SHAW WALLACE: The liquor giant has fallen into hard times and has decided to shift its head office from Calcutta to Bombay. The reason: Shaw Wallace would like to concentrate on its core business, liquor. But employees' unions, already major systems failure and have even invoked the Company Law Board. The affairs of Shaw Wallace are now under probe.

SBI FOREX OPERATIONS: A proposal has been made to shift SBI's forex operations from Calcutta to Bombay. The ostensible reason: merge the bank's forex operations with its treasury department based in Bombay.

PHILIPS: When the global consumer electronics giant recently decided to shift its colour TV plant out of Calcutta, it was greeted with indignation from various quarters. Behind the scenes, Shimoda, a Japanese company, is believed to have acquired a stake in Philips. Philips CEO K. Ramachandran insists that "on the Salt Lake establishment, many alternatives are being explored."

Boom factors...

Baseless fear of labour militancy: Recent data show that West Bengal has the most congenial industrial relations.

Power surplus: It is true that demand for power is less compared to the more industrialised states of India. But the plant load factors of thermal power stations in West Bengal compare favourably with those in other states.

...and bust factors

Management failure: More than labour militancy, it is management failure which is causing problems. It was the same labour force which had made Calcutta a boomtown.

No reinvestment in local industries: Profits generated in the state have not been reinvested. Rather, they have been sent across to other states where factories have come up.

Freight equalisation policy: It has robbed the state of all comparative cost advantages. The distortion will take some time to correct itself.

Central discrimination: West Bengal, along with other eastern and north-eastern states, has been a victim of double standards in

There is never a dull moment in a debate on West Bengal's industrial sickness. Nor is there a dearth of expert opinion explaining what went wrong, or for that matter, how things can be made to look up. A host of factors — economic, social and cultural — seem to be at work, pushing West Bengal into the backwaters

Workers agitating in front of the Dunlop factory: who's to blame?

sitting on a veritable time bomb. Political observers are already blaming the state's chronic industrial sickness for a significant fall in Left votes in the recent Lok Sabha polls. And employment-oriented issues like the eviction of hawkers have become politically explosive.

But how much of West Bengal's industrial slippage can actually be attributed to labour failure? For that matter, how is it that the same workers who once built the British industrial and commercial empire in India suddenly became a drag on society?

"Remaining idle is not a class characteristic of labour. We have always exhorted them to work. In West Bengal, what example have owners and the management set?" asks Niren Ghosh, veteran trade union leader and CPI(M) central committee member. Ghosh points out that industry owners and managers in the state have always blamed labour for unrest while keeping themselves busy in stripping assets and siphoning off funds.

Urbanisation always precedes industrialisation. In West Bengal, however, virtually no investment has been made to build an urban infrastructure

People concerned with industry and labour feel that a host of factors — economic and non-economic — apart from labour, have been responsible for the flight of capital. Recent experience has shown that the labour militancy theory does not fully explain the phenomenon. Between 1990 and 1996, for every strike in the state, there were eight lock-outs on an average. In 1996, while 16.8 lakh man-days were lost due to strikes, a staggering 104.7 lakh were lost due to lock-outs. Moreover, industry has always coexisted with labour militancy and disruptions. Otherwise, Bombay should have been an industrial wasteland by now.

"Corporate headquarters are shifting to Bombay because it is India's financial capital. Banks and lending institutions are headquartered there. The country's

receiving industrial licences and financial accommodation.

Labour militancy: Militant trade unionism is the root cause of the capital flight. Labour in West Bengal is finding it impossible to break out of this stereotype.

No work-culture: The traditional Bengali *babu* is too laid-back and fails to act before problems crop up.

Low productivity: The output per head is way below that of Maharashtra, Gujarat or, for that matter, Karnataka.

Lack of professionalism: Work is done on the basis of interpersonal relations.

Lack of money-making culture: Money-making is looked down upon in West Bengal. Prosperity is not a priority.

Lack of infrastructure: Roads are in a terrible condition. Power is surplus because there are no industrial units to draw power.

Low purchasing power: This is an outcome of low income, and invariably means a small market size. With a small market, a manufacturer has to decide in favour of a high-margin-low-volume strategy.

most vibrant stock exchange is located in that city," says Naba Datta, secretary of Nagarik Mancha, a workers' solidarity group.

Datta points out that urbanisation always precedes industrialisation. In West Bengal, however, virtually no investment has been made to build an urban infrastructure.

But even in such a dismal scenario, there are companies which have survived and grown. These are the ones that have evolved with time, bringing in modern technology and processes.

"You can't expect labour to work with old dilapidated machines and erratic raw material supply and then tell them to ensure productivity," says S.B. Ganguly, chairman and MD of city-based Exide Industries Ltd. Ganguly feels that, given favourable conditions, labour in West Bengal is as productive as anywhere else in India. This view is shared by NICCO vice-chairman Abhijit Sen as well.

Ganguly feels that there is nothing wrong with the state and its labour force. What we are seeing, he points out, is actually the restructuring of the market place.

What about the Marwaris of Calcutta? They were the ones who inherited West Bengal's factories after the British left. Viewed with envy by the Bengalis as "money-making mavericks", business in Bengal has become synonymous with this community. Coming to the city from the hostile environs of Rajasthan, they soon moved on from trade to industry and established themselves as *the* business community. Their *gaddi* culture, with Burrabazar as bastion, gradually pervaded the city and its surroundings.

PRADIP SANYAL

Bidyut Ganguly: advocating management with a human face

"The Marwaris have always felt most comfortable in Calcutta and so it has become their chosen home," says R.S. Agarwal of Emami. And as business flourished, so did Marwari families.

What, then, made Marwari entrepreneurs dump Calcutta and become west and northward bound? "The younger generation is in a hurry. They are determined to achieve more growth in less time. They are eager to move away from Calcutta, to which they are far less bound by sentiment," explains S.K. Todi. But he reveals that the exodus has somewhat weakened in the last three years.

How do West Bengal's mandarins approach the problem? There is the lengthy list of complaints against the central government. Starting from the freight equalisation policy, it includes discrimination in granting licences, in financial accommodation and a host of other areas.

To kickstart the industrial sector, the Left Front government had gone on the overdrive in 1993 to woo investments. But carping critics have branded these efforts as mere eyewash, saying that nothing much has actually taken place.

"It is our vested interest to see that companies in the state should run. Abuse Jyoti Basu, abuse me. But don't abuse West Bengal," says Somnath Chatterjee, WBIDC (West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation) honcho who is steering the state's industrialisation drive.

"Industries which have updated have survived," says state industries minister

SUDIP ACHARYA

Somnath Chatterjee: welcome to West Bengal

Bidyut Ganguly. "There is talent abound. If proper policies are framed and management with a human face is available, there should be no reason why industries cannot come up," he adds.

What are these policies? And who will frame and implement them? When the British left the banks of the Hooghly, the void was quickly filled up by Indian businessmen. And now, as Indian businessmen shift elsewhere — largely blaming labour for West Bengal's industrial sickness — are their places going to be filled up by US, Japanese and German MNCs? •

Sourabh Sen/Calcutta

V. GANGADHAR

Managing CONTRADICTIONS

How will the BJP keep the coalition together?

Most BJP leaders are inward-looking and used to RSS-inspired orderliness. They are usually at sea in dealing with people from a different political milieu. For governing with a wafer-thin majority, they will need all the wily ingenuity of a Bhairon Singh Shekhawat. The breakthrough could come if Vajpayee succeeds in elevating a political coalition to a cultural coalition."

Playing in his final Test match against Pakistan, South African fast bowler, Fanie de Villiers, twice came close to performing a hat-trick in one innings. He took two wickets of successive balls, but the hat-trick eluded him. Indian PM-to-be (by the time this column appears in print he could be the Prime Minister), Atal Behari Vajpayee, figured in a hat-trick plus one. He was featured on the covers of the four leading newsmagazines: *Outlook*, *India Today*, *The Week* and SUNDAY.

The cover stories themselves did not offer much that was new. *Outlook*, while stressing on the stability factor, discussed how the BJP, in its quest for power, had sunk low in morals. It discussed the demands made by the allies of the BJP. Jayalalitha wanted the Karunanidhi government sacked in Tamil Nadu and the withdrawal of the cases filed against her, the Shiv Sena wanted the industries ministry, while the Samata Party was for strong action against the Rabri Devi government in Bihar. *Outlook* focussed on the divergent approaches of the allies on policies. The cover story was quite predictable and did not offer any new insight.

The Week, however, viewed the political happenings from a different angle. In his crisply-written cover story, Debashish Mukerji differentiated between the BJP's 'old' and 'new' allies and how the latter helped to tilt the scales in its favour. Some of them, regional leaders of repute, were reluctant to cohabit with the BJP but Atalji and company wooed them with vigour.

Mukerji pointed out how the alliance partners played a dominant role in the poll process even while sidelining the BJP's favourite themes like Hindutva, Article 370 and the Common Civil Code. So eager was the BJP for the alliances that its leaders readily capitulated. *The Week* also carried a fascinating and detailed account from B. Krishna Kumar and Maria Abraham on how Sharad Pawar finalised the deals with the Samajwadi and Republican parties and carried the alliance to a remarkable victory in Maharashtra.

The cover story in SUNDAY was more personalised. It pointed out that: "Vajpayee had been managing contradictions for much of his political life... But the contradictions in this government may become too much even for him to handle." SUNDAY also referred to the internal divisions within the BJP. How long will the lunatic fringes in the VHP, Vidyarthi Parishad and Bajrang Dal, remain quiet while the BJP leadership pushed into the background issues like the Ram Mandir or the Common Civil Code? Diluting the party's essential plan could cost the BJP plenty.

India Today, as was to be expected, was euphoric over Atalji. Swapan Dasgupta and Saban Naqvi Bhaumik argued that the Congress-led Opposition, in the absence of a viable alternative, would think twice before dislodging the government and taking the nation to yet another general election. Can the BJP get along with mavericks like Dr Subramaniam Swamy, Mamata Banerjee and Om Prakash Chautala?

Said the *India Today* cover story: "An easy-going leader, Vajpayee is not known for either cunning or ruthlessness. He is most comfortable in mass politics but the problems of coalitions are not resolved through thundering speeches. Nor is the party of much help.

But a cultural coalition could be dominated by the RSS. And if Bhairon Singh Shekhawat was such a political wizard, how come the BJP fared so badly in Rajasthan? The cover story was silent on these issues.

How not to pay taxes

No one likes to pay taxes. Least of all, the people at *Business Standard*. A rec-

The alliance partners played a dominant role in the poll process even while sidelining the BJP's favourite themes like Hindutva, Article 370 and the Common Civil Code. So eager was the BJP for the alliances that its leaders readily capitulated

ent issue of the *BS* magazine offered some very special advice on 'Dodging The Taxman'. "If you are reasonably healthy and not a hypochondriac, your medical allowance should translate into your family beautification allowance. Most chemists will give you a medical bill for any of the wares they sell, so stock up on those expensive shampoos, creams and gels. Remembet on every product, the government gives you a cool 30 per cent discount." As for 'leave travel allowance' the magazine advised that in case you were too busy to actually fly somewhere on your holiday, there was no need to let the taxman know about your plans. "Simply buy a return plane ticket for a fare greater than your LTA (pay by credit card for maximum ease), photocopy it and send it to your company. Then simply cancel the ticket and wait for that extra 30 per cent to flow in with your next pay cheque. This ploy would work best if the employee took a week off at that time and kept a low profile away from the office."

Since there is a 30 per cent discount on books, catch your paperwalah and ask for some blank bills. Charitable trusts can also help you to save money by not paying taxes. Advises the *BS* magazine: "You can benefit your favourite cause (yourself) by finding charities and trusts which are attached to big business in some way. Now big businesses try to wash their black money into white and they need your help to do it. So approach any of the large established trusts and for any contribution you make in cheque, they will give you the entire sum back in cash. Okay, so you get some black money, but hey, you can spend it."

What is business journalism coming to? A 'respectable' newspaper highlighting suggestions to cheat the government so blatantly! Next time, *BS* carries a thundering editorial on the evils of tax evasion, we should ask them to read their own magazine article. •

Good move

The Linares victory may be Anand's launching pad for the No. 1 slot

Viswanathan Anand's mid-tournament slump was shrugged off with ease by the Indian genius to win the prestigious Linares international chess tournament.

Anand's second loss in a world championship in just over two years' time led to the speculation about how quickly he would recover. Former challenger Nigel Short, who took over three years to recover fully from his loss to Garry Kasparov in 1993, explains, "After you lose a world championship for which you put in so much, the routine tournaments appear to be too insignificant and you tend to ask yourself what's the point of playing at all."

But Anand bounced right back in the two events that followed the world championship in close succession, the 17-category Hoogovens tournament in Wijk Ann Zee and the 21-category Super GM tournament in Linares. Anand won both.

The first jointly with Vladimir Kramnik with just a few days rest after the world championship and the second half-a-point ahead of Alexei Shirov and a full point ahead of Kramnik and Kasparov. The Linares meet is the toughest chess tournament and Anand says he values taking first place in it as much as his triumph at the knockouts in Groningen.

But his failure against Karpov was very different in nature, the rights and conditions of the two players vying for the title were so strongly unequal that Anand dismissed his loss as something that one cannot take seriously. To quote him, "I would like to remember it as winning a very tough tournament."

At the time of the Hoogovens tournament, Anand should have still been quite tired, yet he managed to win five games (though all his victims were the tail-enders), drew seven and lost just one, his first to Judith Polgar ever since she attained puberty.

"A 100 per cent score even against the tail-enders is very good, when they are people like Topalov and Salov you are beating. Besides, winning the first tournament of the year is always very special," said Short evaluating Anand's performance.

In Linares, Anand got off to a brilliant start beating Shirov and Peter Svidler in the first two games but lost to Kasparov in the third. After that he was more or less quiet until his late surge won him two of the last three games. Both his victims were the tail-enders again, but they were still as formidable as Vassily Ivanchuk and Vaselin Topalov. He achieved a 60+ per cent score (7.5/12) with four wins, one loss and seven draws, a rating performance higher by some phenomenal 75 points than his own rating of 2770.

His eyes are now firmly set on the world championship knockouts this December and he has quite sensibly rejected an offer from Kasparov to play in a parallel world championship comprising the top three: Kasparov, Kramnik and Anand. There should be no dearth of confidence in him now, with a million dollars and a world title on the line. But Anand's rejection indicates that he is more interested in the knockouts than the traditional match format of world championship events.

Anand's mental toughness can never be in doubt. The marathon tournament that helped him qualify for the title round would have drained any other player. Karpov was fresh and had all the time in the world to study Anand's pattern of play in the qualifying rounds. Even so, the fact that the Indian maestro stretched the match to the tie-breaker was a feat possible only for a champion. Anand, after all, had played 31 matches to Karpov's measly eight.

The Linares triumph must be regarded as the starting burst in the race to a third try for the elusive number one spot. •

Aniek Paul with Arijit Sen/Calcutta

Anand's mental toughness can never be in doubt. The marathon tournament that helped him qualify for the title round would have drained any other player

D RATNAM

Sushmita Sen's career has got a fresh lease of life with *Zor*. Not only is she looking good in the movie (a distinct improvement on *Dastak*) but she also manages to act up a storm (well, at least, it looks like that, given that she is pitted against Sunny Deol).

But whether Sen can capitalise on this really depends on whether she is willing to put her private life on the backburner — for the moment, at least. But if she insists on giving Vikram Bhatt (her live-love lover/secretly-wedded husband; take your pick) priority over all else, then it may well spell *finis* to her career in the movies.

Govinda is sick and tired of people making fun of his taste in clothes. Why can't they understand, he asks, that he only wears what his producers and dress designers lay out for him?

GOVINDA

RAKESH SHRESTHA

If people want to judge how he dresses, they should see him in real life, says Govinda. Then they would know that he wears the best of designer clothes, ranging from Gianni Versace to Giorgio Armani.

That's probably true. But how does one explain to Govinda that the problem is that even these sophisticated outfits look a trifle naff on him?

Old Veejays don't fade away; they turn into television actresses instead. Well, at least, that's the way that Ruby Bhatia (of *BPL Oye* and *Planet Ruby* fame) has gone. She is currently starring in a prime-time serial on STAR Plus, *Yeh Hai Raaz*, along with Aly Khan (of Begum Sumroo and Pooja Bhatt fame). Bhatia plays the whiz-kid detective — a female Karamchand, so to speak — with Aly functioning as her side-kick.

But Bhatia seems to be taking the strong, silent bit a trifle too seriously. She goes through each episode with an unwavering dead-pan expression on her face. And this doesn't vary at all, even if there are bombs exploding all around her.

Perhaps, somebody should take the poor girl aside and tell her that there's more to acting than looking as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth.

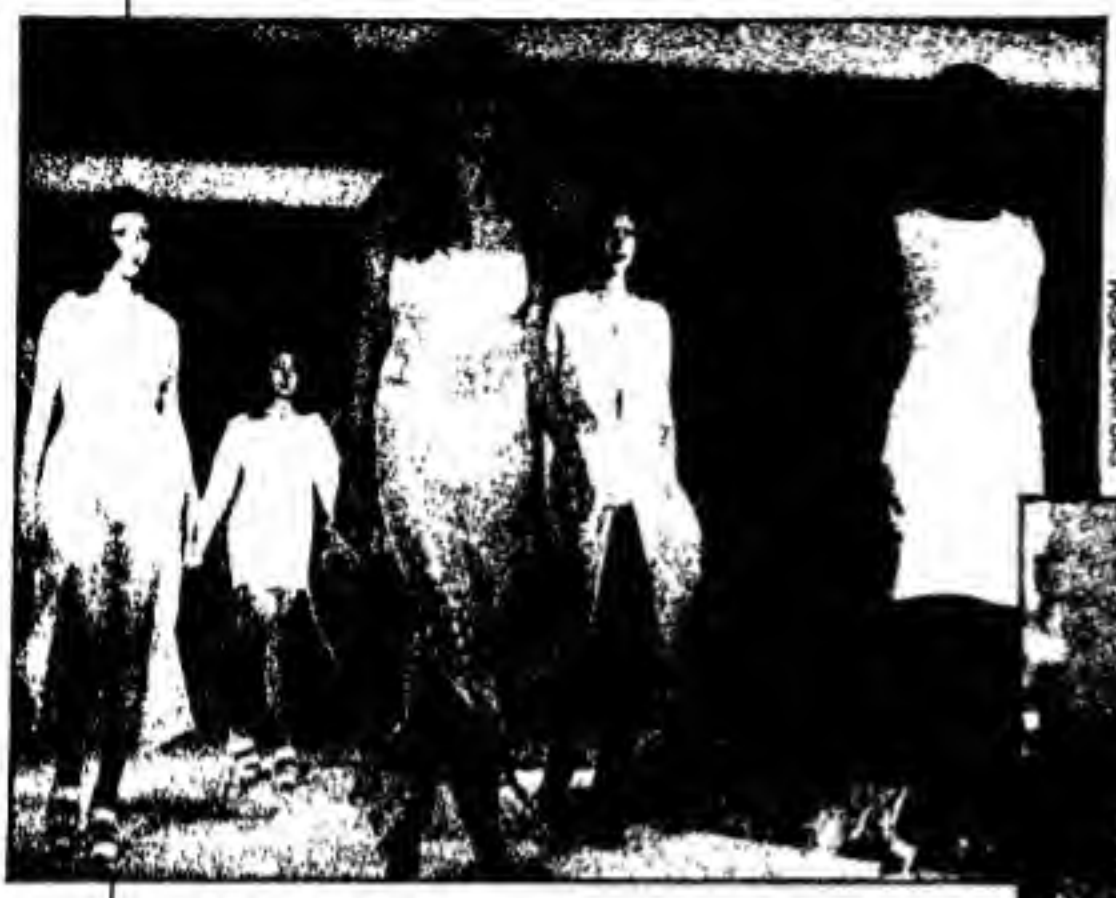
RUBY BHATIA

RAKESH SHRESTHA

TABU

Just what magic diet is Tabu on? Every time you see the girl, she looks thinner and more ethereal than ever. Her bones are more sharply defined, the waist is a couple of inches thinner, and her double chins are a thing of the past.

So, how does Tabu — who was once an aspirant to the title 'Thunder Thighs' — do it? Does she starve herself *a la* Pooja Bhatt? Or is the love (from fiance Sajid Khan) and fresh-air diet that is working these miracles? •



RASHBEHARI DAS

A SENSUOUS EVENING

It was titillation at The Park. Models walking seductively before you in transparent nightwear. Evening gowns with thigh-length slits in experimental red, green, maroon, gold and rust. Of course, it wasn't just orgasmic stuff. The wholly Western range also included casual and formal wear like sleeved jackets over stretch trousers. The climax was sensational: forms that could be moulded on the human silhouette with silk yarn and copper wire. "I just love it," said Manoviraj Khosla, whose Kingfisher Line debuted in Calcutta courtesy Vijay Mallya's United Breweries. ASHOKE CHAKRABARTY

Vijay Mallya (inset) and models on the ramp: show-stoppers

A word about the models: There was Madhu Sapre (the python, of course, was missing!), Noyonika Chatterjee and Tarun Raghavan. And yeah, they excited.

TRIBUTES

It was a maestro paying tribute to an old master. Sitarist Ustad Vilayat Khan, releasing the first double CD and cassette albums of the lat vocalist, Amir Khan's live recordings in Calcutta recently, was high on emotions. "Few such artistes are born in a century," he said, grappling with a flood of memories.

An exponent of Hindustani classical music, Amir Khan died i a road accident more than 20 years ago. Now his actor son Shahbaz Khan and a few others are collecting his scarce personal recordings on digital tracks. The albums were produced by a London-based company,

WHEN PEACE COMES DROPPING SLOW

In your mind's eye you roll the image of Richard Gere and, oh! you swoon. That is only if you are a woman. But what is Hollywood's suave dreamboat doing in lawless Bihar? Here's the story in brief:

Gere, who converted to Buddhism and was recently in Gaya, Bihar with His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, has been nominated chairman of the Mahabodhi Temple Development Subcommittee.

Richard Gere: spiritual callings

At the heart of the matter lies a history of blood-feud. Between Buddhists who refer to the shrine as the Mahabodhi Vihara and Hindus, who prefer calling it a temple. Gere, say those who know him, has been asked to find a solution to the dispute.

Maybe, it's something to do with his mystique. Gere oozes charisma.

PRADIP SANYAL

Vilayat Khan releasing the cassettes; to his right is Shahbaz Khan. (And inset) The cassette cover: memories of the master

Navras, which has been bringing out quality records of traditional Indian music.

RICHIE RICH

[redacted] It's cool. It's fresh. It's what he is doing for Pepsi. Bhaichung Bhutia, India's highest-paid footballer, has just signed his umpteenth ad deal — this time for Pepsi.

His income from these media forays has not been disclosed, but a substantial part of the rupees seven-crore advertising budget would have to be forked out. Which should make him the richest footballer in the game by miles. Bhaichung had started with the International Management Group contract which netted Reebok.

Of course, the Pepsi contract comes with a suffix. If he doesn't end his goal-drought, sponsors and ad men are going to push him into the deep blue. And real hard.

Bhaichung Bhutia: It's goals we want

SANTOSH GHOSH

EXPRESSIONS

TAYEB MUSHIR

Anupam Kher: when the eyes speak

[redacted] You are caught in a swirl of emotions; every week you fall in love with a different woman...Oh! what do you do because you cannot speak and your fantasies and heartbreaks find no words?

Simple. You do what most of us cannot — you let your eyes speak till expressions become words and the title becomes the story.

A Silent Love Story is produced by Anupam Kher. The serial is directed by Anuradha Tiwari.

WEST BENGAL

Post-mortem

After the polls: the CPI(M) stands divided over the Dum Dum debacle; the Congress camp limps back to life

DESHAKALYAN CHOWDHURY

ALL IN THE GAME: *Election '98, Calcutta*

After the newly-formed Trinamul Congress (TMC) and its ally, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), captured Calcutta and its neighbourhood, people thought that a red-faced Left Front would be forced into a round of introspection.

But even as marathon post-mortem sessions become the order of the day at the CPI(M)'s Alimuddin Street headquarters in Calcutta, the picture which is emerging is that of a party groping for ways to internalise the defeat. And the failure to do so has resulted in a search for scapegoats.

The hot spot, no doubt, is the Dum Dum Lok Sabha seat, a traditional stronghold of the CPI(M) — the dominant partner in the Left Front. This time, the electorate in Dum Dum has backed the BJP, enabling state party president Tapan Sikdar to defeat the CPI(M) candidate, Nirmal Chatterjee, by around 1,37,000 votes. Moreover, in other Calcutta seats which were won by the TMC, the percentage of votes polled by the CPI(M) plummeted.

Though the party shows no sign of fissure, two divergent views have come to the fore. A section of CPI(M) leaders squarely blame West Bengal's "industrial sickness" and the party's "failed industrial drive" for its recent electoral debacle. Not a single factory has come up since 1993, even after so many MoUs were signed, they point out. In Dum Dum, locked-out industrial units and collusion of party leaders with land-developers completed the rout, sources in the CPI(M) add.

It is being alleged that the party's Dum Dum strongman and 'mass mobiliser' Subhash Chakrabarty kept himself away from campaigning in his own backyard because his men lost out in the CPI(M)'s organisational elections held a few months back. A section of the CPI(M) leadership, no doubt, is baying for his blood.

These charges are countered by those sticking to the party line. They [illegible] that the industrialisation drive, launched in 1992, wa[illegible]ed up unnecessarily without a proper understanding of the process. And in raising the industrialisation bogey, the political managers in the CPI(M) are only trying to shift the blame for their dismal failure.

ASHOK MAJUMDER

CPI(M) sources point out that the party leadership was warned well in advance about what was coming in Dum Dum. But for some strange reason, no action was taken. Barely 48 hours before the constituency went to the polls, a central committee member had told SUNDAY that Nirmal Chatterjee, the sitting CPI(M) MP, was going to win Dum Dum "by over one lakh votes".

"There is no division in the party. We were misled by surface features," says Subhash Chakrabarty. That's how he reconciles himself to the drubbing that his party got.

But on the streets of Calcutta and its surrounding areas, there are lakhs of demoralised CPI(M) cadres trying hard to turn a deaf ear to the taunts of the TMC boys. While their leaders hold one closed-door meeting after the other.

MEANWHILE, THE Congress camp in Calcutta is limping back to life. On the night of 2 March, the tension was palpable at the Haji Mohammad Mohsin Square central office of the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee (WBPCC). The Lok Sabha trends had started pouring in and things looked pretty bleak for the Congress candidates, huddled around a television set.

On 3 March, the state Congress' worst fears came true. The party had lost all but one of the 42 seats it had contested in West Bengal. The only candidate to make it was veteran Congressman A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chowdhury from Malda.

It was a body blow to the PCC chief, Somen Mitra, his present mentor-cum-tutor Pranab Mukherjee and other state Congress leaders. Even a fortnight before the polls, Mitra had boasted about the Congress' organisational strength. He seemed sure that Mamata Banerjee would not be able to domuch.

"Look, I have faith in the people of this state. They have been with us in our fight against the Left Front. Moreover, nobody has survived politically after leaving the Congress and the same fate awaits Mamata," he had crowed.

But at the end of the day, Mitra was proved hopelessly wrong. Mamata and her Trinamul Congress bagged seven seats, while its ally, the BJP, took one. Mitra took moral responsibility for the Congress' debacle in the state and resigned from the chief's post.

To political analysts in West Bengal, the Congress' sharp drop from nine seats to one, did not come as a surprise. The die had, in fact, been cast once the PCC decided to alienate Mamata Banerjee. For quite some time, a section of the PCC leaders — Pradip Bhattacharya, Saugata Roy, Sadhan Pande, Manash Bhuiyan, Abdul Mannan — backed by Pranab Mukherjee, had been gunning for Banerjee.

Today, a section of the Congress leaders and workers are openly blaming the anti-Mamata brigade for misleading Somen Mitra. "Pranab Mukherjee, Saugata Roy, Manash Bhuyian and Abdul Mannan are entirely responsible for the party committing hara-kiri. They constantly pressured Mitra and forced him to ignore Congress leaders who would have won seats for the party. Mitra succumbed to the pressure and just see the outcome. These people and their vested interests have completely destroyed the state outfit," said senior PCC leader Prodyut Guha.

VANQUISHED: *Somen Mitra*

"People know that senior Congress leaders are hobnobbing with the ruling Left Front government. Moreover, they have also lost faith in the leaders of the Seventies — Somen Mitra, Subroto Mukherjee and Priya Ranjan Das Munshi. It is high time that fresh blood is inducted into the party's top leadership. I have written a letter to that effect to Sonia Gandhi and the decision will come through any day," Prodyut Guha said.

"It is extremely wrong to say that any single person is responsible for the Congress' performance. There is no need for witch-hunting," said Dr Manash Bhuyian. "You see, the Congress has been defeated because of the entry of the BJP; and Mamata has taken advantage of the triangular contests in most constituencies."

Meanwhile, though no formal meetings are being held in the PCC office, lobbying for the president's post has begun in real earnest. According to sources, the PCC is backing A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chowdhury or Priya Ranjan Das Munshi for the top post in the state Congress. But efforts are also on, among a section of the Congress leaders, to bring back former chief minister Siddhartha Shankar Ray as the new PCC president. And if S.S. Ray misses the bus, then this camp will back Prodyut Guha. •

Sourabh Sen and Arindam Sarkar/Calcutta

"We shall overcome"

Subhash Chakrabarty vows to fight back

Sunday: What are the reasons behind the Dum Dum debacle?
Subhash Chakrabarty: No doubt we were defeated. There are many reasons. We could not see the anti-Left undercurrent sweeping through the constituency. But even if we had recognised the trend, it would not have been possible to arrest the slide in such a short time.

Q: Did the middle class dump the CPI(M) because of locked-out factories, lack of civic amenities, illegal constructions...
A: No doubt these are contributing factors. But the main factors are the huge Hindu backlash, and the soft corner for the BJP among Left voters on the question of stability. Throughout Calcutta, these two factors, along with the anti-establishment wave, have helped anti-Left votes.

Q: You kept a surprisingly low profile during campaigning. Was it because you had lost out in the CPI(M)'s organisational elections in the district?
A: After a debacle in war, it is natural that the anger will fall on the leadership. But I don't believe in negative work.

Q: But you may be pulled up...
A: Who will pull up whom?

Q: What is the CPI(M) going to do now?
A: Leaders are meeting. They are assessing the situation. But this shift in the allegiance of Left voters is a temporary phenomenon. We shall overcome. •

Interviewed by Sourabh Sen/Calcutta

MADHYA PRADESH

Trouble in the heartland

Congress leaders in the Chhattisgarh region blame Digvijay Singh for the party's poor performance

With the Congress losing as many as 30 out of the 40 Lok Sabha seats in Madhya Pradesh, Digvijay Singh-baiters in the state have gone into overdrive. Some have even issued statements squarely blaming the chief minister for the party's poor showing. Others have informed senior Congress leaders like Sitaram Kesri and Sonia Gandhi that the Digvijay Singh government's acts of "commission and omission" were responsible for the Congress' rout in Madhya Pradesh. Digvijay Singh has come under fire from almost all quarters. And with four out of the six members of his Cabinet who contested the parliamentary polls having been beaten, the CM is hardly in a position to counter-attack.

Former chief minister Shyama Charan Shukla, who is once again aspiring for the state's top job, feels that it was the farmers' vote that tilted the scales against the Congress. According to him, the state government had done precious little for the agricultural sector. It had not taken prompt action to extend relief to those farmers whose crops had been destroyed in hailstorms. Also, government agencies were hand-in-glove with brokers who were selling paddy at high prices, while the farmers themselves could not sell their produce at the desired price.

There was a general feeling that the state government was inefficient, corrupt and apathetic towards farmers, claims Shukla. That's where the battle for MP was lost. While admitting that Atal Behari Vajpayee's campaign did strike a chord, the veteran Congressman insisted that there was no BJP wave in the state. Shukla feels that the Sonia Gandhi factor was nullified in MP as the Congress did not have an adequate cadre-force to drive the advantage home.

KISSA KURSI KA: *S.C. Shukla (left); Ajit Jogi*

SUDIP ACHARYA

UNDER FIRE: *Digvijay Singh*

Rameshwar Giri, president of the Raipur District (rural) Congress Committee, has also asserted that the people of Madhya Pradesh have voted against the state government. Had not Sonia Gandhi campaigned for the party, the situation would have been worse, he feels. "The Digvijay Singh government did not do anything worthwhile for the farmers. While the Congress workers toiled whole-heartedly for the party, it was the state government's failure to provide relief to the farmers that led to the Congress' defeat," observes Giri.

Meanwhile, Ajit Jogi, who won the Raigarh seat defeating the BJP state chief Nandkumar Sai, has all but staked a claim for the state's top job by reiterating the need for "a tribal CM" in MP. With Dilip Singh Bhuria and Arvind Netam leaving the Congress, Ajit Jogi remains the only tribal leader of consequence in the party.

"The only way to ensure that a UP or Bihar-like situation does not arise in MP, we must hand over the reins of power to the weaker sections of society," claims Jogi, and goes on to state that he is the only tribal leader in the whole of Mahakoshal Vindhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh region to have won the Lok Sabha polls.

Jogi has further pointed out that the defeat of former Union minister Vidya Charan Shukla, from Raipur, has left a vacuum in Chhattisgarh which he is ready to fill up. "The Congress debacle in these elections is a serious matter. The party will have to review the situation, scrutinise the reasons for the defeat and remove the lacunae before the Vidhan Sabha elections," says Jogi, who feels that had the Congress entered into an electoral alliance with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the results would not have been so dismal.

Former UP Governor and former Union minister Motilal Vora, who won the Rajnandgaon seat with a comfortable majority, has, however stated that the ruling government had been quite sympathetic towards the problems of the people.

But Vora's seems to be a lone voice. As criticism against him mounts and CMs-in-waiting queue up, Digvijay Singh walks a political tightrope, yet again. •

Manik Madhukar Kher/Raipur

BANGLADESH

Difference of opinion

Sheikh Hasina's 'government of consensus' runs into trouble

There is more trouble for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed. This time in the form of two Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) rebels, Dr Mohammad Alauddin and Hasibur Rahman Swapan. Alauddin and Swapan were inducted by the PM into her 'national consensus' Cabinet last month. But they have been unable to attend Parliament since 8 March, the day the principal Opposition party of Bangladesh — led by former PM Begum Khaleda Zia — rejoined proceedings.

Mohammad Alauddin and Hasibur Rahman Swapan had been assigned seats on the back-benches — just behind the Jatiya Party row — by the ruling Awami League after becoming ministers. But they claim that they still belong to the BNP. This has irked the BNP legislators who refuse to allow the two to occupy the vacant seats on the Opposition benches.

Alauddin and Swapan's efforts to occupy a place in Parliament have been thwarted by a hostile BNP battalion, which hurls abuses at PM Hasina and threatens to beat up her two newly-inducted ministers.

Col (retd) Akbar Hossain, former minister and senior BNP legislator, led the attack against Alauddin and Swapan, claiming that the two deserved to be punished for tarnishing the image of the Opposition group. Launching a personal attack, Hossain accused them both of committing adultery.

"If one lives with a woman willingly without tying the knot of marriage, it is called adultery, which is punishable by stoning to death," Hossain told Speaker Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury. "They (Alauddin and Swapan) should do what I did: I married the second woman!" he added.

PARLIAMENTARY PROTEST: *Begum Khaleda Zia*

DIVERSITY IN UNITY: *Sheikh Hasina Wajed addressing a rally*

Hasina has only herself to blame for the mess that has been created following the induction of Alauddin and Swapan into her Cabinet. The PM had led her partymen to believe that she had pulled off a coup of sorts by winning over the two BNP men. She had even promised that "bigger surprises" were in store.

This was part of an elaborate exercise to prevent the collapse of the 330-member Parliament when and if the BNP, with 113 deputies, chose to resign. Hasina was targeting those in the Opposition ranks who were upset over the BNP leadership's extended boycott of Parliament.

But in a dramatic turnaround, the BNP suddenly decided to end its six-month-long boycott and rejoin Parliament. So, from 8 March, 111 BNP deputies are back where they belong.

The Bangladesh Constitution clearly states that a lawmaker loses his seat in Parliament if: he resigns from the party that nominated him for a general election, or if he votes against his party in the legislature.

Alauddin and Swapan have neither quit nor voted against the BNP. They insist that they are part of the Opposition group, while having faith in the PM's concept of "national consensus administration". But the BNP has expelled both of them and asked Speaker Chowdhury to declare their seats "vacated".

So, both Alauddin and Swapan stand to lose their seats in Parliament. But the PM has assured them that they would soon return via by-elections, nominated by the Awami League. But for now, both are living in fear. While BNP activists tried to torch Alauddin's house in Rajshahi town, Swapan had to visit his constituency of Shahjadpur in Sirajganj town under heavy protection.

The fate of these two legislators epitomises the failure of Sheikh Hasina's much-touted 'national consensus government'. Her arch-rival, Begum Khaleda Zia, has dismissed this concept as "a hoax" aimed at restoring "one-party rule".

Even former President and Jatiya Party chief H.M. Ershad is now desperate to pull out of the 'consensus government'. There is trouble within the country's third-largest party (having 33 legislators) over this issue and the 67-year-old military strongman insists that he will have nothing to do with the concept of national government.

The Jamaat-e-Islami, an Opposition group with three lawmakers, feels that Hasina has floated such a concept to eliminate all forms of democratic dissent in Bangladesh. •

Rahman Jahangir/Dhaka

WEST BENGAL

Path to progress

Will INDPLAS '98 kick-start the plastic industry in the state?

Plastic, today, is a way of life. The amount and range of plastic use goes a long way in determining the developmental index of a country, the character of a people. But consider this: the per-capita consumption of polymers in India is just 1.6 kg, as against the world average of 15 kg; in West Bengal it is 0.57 kg; in eastern India it is 0.28 kg. And you thought that we were going plastic?

But if INDPLAS '98, held in Calcutta recently, was any indication, there is hope yet for the plastic industry in eastern India. Organised by the Indian Plastic Federation (IPF), and co-sponsored by Plastindia Foundation, Haldia Petrochemicals Ltd (HPL), Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Ltd (IPCL) and West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation Ltd (WBIDC), the National Plastics Exhibition was the biggest show of its kin . in eastern India.

"It was a grand suc ess. Our objectives of bringing the plastic family together u der one umbrella and creating an awareness among the soc al and business community in this part of India have been m re than fulfilled," feels IPF president R.K. Kasera who, alongwith S.C. Bhutoria, Alok Ghosh, Amar Seth, P.K. Chopra, R.A. Lohia and others, was among the men behind the show.

Held from 6-11 March, the exhibition showcased the latest products, machinery and technologies of the plastic fraternity. "Participants from all over the country, even Taiwan and Austria, and the delegations from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka have all expressed their satisfaction," says S.C. Bhutoria, chairman of the exhibition organising committee.

But in pure business terms, how successful was INDPLAS '98? "It is impossible to tabulate the tangible and intangible benefits of the exhibition," observes co-chairman of the exhibition organising committee, Amar Seth. "But there has been a bumper sale of machines; the general public flocked to the fair in large numbers; and the Entrepreneurs Guidance Cell was a great hit. We believe that the exhibition will be a positive catalyst to the industrial growth of West Bengal."

The theme of INDPLAS '98 was: 'join the resurgent eastern India'. While the region accounts for just about 7 per cent of the national polymer consumption now, it is likely to touch the 12 per cent mark by the turn of the century, i.e., a

BUSINESS AND POLITICS: *Bidyut Ganguly inaugurating the exhibition*

"21st century is the century of plastic"

Says industries minister Bidyut Ganguly

SUNDAY: What is the significance of INDPLAS '98?
Bidyut Ganguly: It is of great significance to the state. It enables the exchange of views and technology, it spreads awareness among the general public and student community. Such trade fairs help a lot in the development of the economy.

Q: The objective of the exhibition is to develop the plastic industry in the east...
A: It's true that in eastern India the plastic industry is very weak. It's nowhere in the country's picture. The Left Front government views this situation very seriously. We realise that the 21st century is the century of plastic.

Q: So, what steps are you taking for the speedy development of the industry?
A: Earlier, the plastic industry was in no shape here. But now, the petrochemical industry is on in full swing, following the commissioning of Haldia Petrochemicals.

Q: But the government has done nothing about the sales tax problem...
A: The IPF has given its list of grievances to the finance ministry and to me. Their contention is that the sales tax on plastic goods is much higher here than in other states and if that is reduced substantially, the total quantum of revenue earning will go up...The Budget session is on and so I should not say anything, but we'll be taking up the matter with the finance ministry.

You see, everybody wants sales tax remission. But I'm going to explain to the IPF that when they put up downstream units, they'll automatically get sales-tax exemption for a good number of years.

Q: So, no special incentives for the plastic industry?
A: There are so many demands from everywhere. The government also has to discharge its duties, its social obligations, etc. And the financial power of the state government is very limited.

Q: Despite all this, you are still hopeful that the plastic industry will progress in this region?
A: Yes, definitely. Otherwise a huge development opportunity will be lost.

GOOD SHOW: *INDPLAS '98*

growth rate of 60 to 65 per cent in the coming years.

The focal point, of course, is HPL. With Haldia targeting plant commissioning in mid-1999, the 'mega grassroots petrochemicl complex', with an estimated project cost of Rs 5,170 crore, is expected to trigger off a chain reaction and accelerate the development of plastic and allied industries in the region.

"The two-way communication at INDPLAS '98, between raw material suppliers and entrepreneurs, potential industrialists and machine manufacturers, was most encouraging. Our pavilion had more than 800 visitors and several serious business enquiries have come in from entrepreneurs interested in setting up downstream industries based on HPL raw materials," says Shankar Banerjee, vice-president (marketing), HPL.

But for all that, the plastic path to progress in West Bengal remains a potholed one. "Frankly speaking, the Taiwanese have a very bad image about Calcutta. They think it is very out of date, like a countryside, not like Bombay and Delhi," admits Simon Tsao, export director, Nan Rong Mechanical Co. Ltd, who participated in INDPLAS. "But I have got a very good response and I'm looking forward to do business here. I have opened the doors for myself and now I'm going to encourage other Taiwanese industrialists to come to Calcutta," adds Tsao.

The plastic industry's principal problem in West Bengal remains that of high sales tax: 13.8 per cent on finished plastic products (a lot of which have to be imported from other parts of the country) and three per cent on raw materials for manufacturers.

"The government is just not understanding this problem. Instead of saying that they are interested in reviving the plastic industry, they can send out a positive signal by lowering the sales tax," says A.K. Das, CRM, IPCL, Calcutta.

Though West Bengal has adequate power, cheap labour, sufficient water, low land prices and political stability, "the lack of industrial temperament and work culture, and the absence of business orientation among politicians and the public alike is impeding the development of the plastic industry here, especially in the vital small-scale sector", feels Nitin Bhatt of IPCL, Baroda.

"But now, a change in mind-set is coming about in the corridors of power," declares R.K. Kasera. This, together with the growing business prospects in the region, could mark a new beginning for the plastic industry in the state. •

Sumit Das Gupta/Calcutta

TELEVISION

SHUBHRA GUPTA

Good mornings

GMI on STAR Plus is the best of the lot

Good Morning India, STAR Plus's daily morning show, turned all of one last week, and they celebrated with cakes, candles, and songs.

Over the past year, the show has gone from its tentative beginnings to a much more assured product. In its early days, one always gave into the urge to switch between *GMI*, *Good Morning Today* and *The First Edition*. Now, one is likely to stay with *GMI* through its two hours, except during its few dislikeable bits.

Its chief problem persists — it is still trying to be all things to all people. So, it gives you, among other things, a 'golden oldie' (a Hindi film song, mostly from the black-and-white era), birthday wishes, your horoscope for the day (twice in the space of an hour), news (in English and Hindi, twice), a sports section, recipes, celebrity profiles, mini travelogues...

Sometimes it gets too crowded. Sometimes, the anchors' banter seems forced because they are trying too

CELEBRITY PEOPLE: *Madhuri Dixit*

hard to be casual. But, on the whole, the youthful energy that *GMI* manages to transmit transcends the drawbacks, and makes it a consistently good-looking show.

Its chief asset is its celebrity section: the show works hard in getting hold of famous faces and hanging them on its current pegs. So you might find Madhuri Dixit in her down-to-earth, Maharashtrian mode, talking about a recent award, or Milind Soman, biting off a yawn, on the subject of Being Beautiful In X Campaign.

Morning shows can be a nice start to the day, if you are inclined towards your TV set first thing. And if you remember the time, not so long back, when the only thing that lived and breathed in the mornings was the loquacious Deepak Vohra, between the lonely, lamboo kids and *bhajans*, on the national network's morning transmission, you'll know how far we've come since then.

Now we've got choice now! may *GMI* and its tribe thrive. •

SUNDAY WEEK

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 22 MARCH, 1998

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

Friends can make light work of any heavy load. See what you can do to outvote those who oppose your schemes. You may be off on a long trip yourself, or seeing someone else off. Grab a chance to develop an educational interest. Try to get a young person involved in social concerns.

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

Past patterns and precedents are more hindrances than help. Shake off the limitations of previous approaches or attitudes, and face the present afresh. Turn over a new leaf or set out on new paths. Hanging on to the familiar, out of feelings of insecurity, will hamper your progress and potential.

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

Leave as little to chance as possible where journeys are concerned. You may tread on the toes of loved ones: be more sensitive to their feelings and needs. Casual flirtations can fizzle out before they have begun. Digging and delving and getting to the bottom of things will be rewarding.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

Officials can be sticklers for rules and regulations. There may be exciting developments in romance: you feel things are really taking off because of the effect your partner is having on you. Don't hold back if you've taken a fancy to anyone.

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

You are in the right mood and situation to spread your wings. This could indeed mean you hit the trail once more, or that you contend with a good book that can answer what you have to ask. Where things have to be done, it is best to do them yourself. Discussions help but the action must be precise.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

One or the other in joint financial affairs is getting a raw deal. It is important that shared funds and assets are made accessible to all involved. Greater benefits can come from dealings with large business organisations than you imagined.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

Cast your planning eye forward. Business expenses can be substantially reduced. People from overseas or distant places will make interesting companions. They may become firm friends. Parties and social gatherings can be fun. Draw up wills and handle matters connected to legacies.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

Flattery won't get you anywhere: be straightforward from the start. Don't lead potential romantic partners on if you have no real intention of allowing a more serious relationship to develop. Mates and spouses may pour cold water on your plans.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

Monetary rewards will be received for work well done. You should introduce incentives schemes for people on the payroll: this can bring about a marked change in productivity, efficiency levels and overall morale. Loved ones will want to work things out their own way. Try not to hem them in.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

New patterns and working procedures may be forced upon you. You can find it hard to adapt to change. Conditions do not favour long journeys. Too much wasted time and aggravation will be involved. You may have the urge to make some changes in and around your home.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

Sharing should be good fun. Lone efforts will not pay off. There could be an argument going on around you: take a step back so that you can see what is happening. The temptation to get involved is strong, but wiser counsel may prevail. A friend can help you cope with a task that needs two pairs of hands.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

You may have little choice but to follow convention and act in ways people expect of you. Waywardness or eccentricity can do your reputation no good. Behaving in entirely unexpected ways is likely to throw family members off balance. •

Off the record

The BJP may have its [illegible] West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee (WBPCC) [illegible] Pranab Mukherjee.

PCC chief Somen Mitra did the noble thing by resigning from his post after the beating the Congress(I) took in Lok Sabha elections in West Bengal. But that was for the record. Off the record, he told friends that the whole election cam-

Pranab Mukherjee: the real culprit

paign was paid for and run by Pranab Mukherjee.

Mitra says Pranab Mukherjee thought that as he was [illegible] the paper, he should [illegible]

> HEARD AT THE BJP HEADQUARTERS
>
> **We're praying and watching videos of *Haseena Maan Jayegi*.**
>
> AN MP, ON THE BJP'S ATTEMPTS TO MOLLIFY AIADMK LEADER AND BJP ALLY

Walking the tightrope

Poor Digvijay Singh. Shattered by the Congress' defeat in the Lok Sabha elections in Madhya Pradesh, and insecure about his position, he's prepared to offer support to anyone and everyone he's sure will not replace him.

Digvijay contacted Sharad Pawar and offered him support in getting Pawar appointed Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) chief. What Pawar didn't tell him out of politeness was that the Congress had won so few seats from Madhya Pradesh that Digvijay's support was of no consequence.

Singh then approached Madhavrao Scindia and tried to tell him how important he was to a leader who was aspiring to be the CPP chief. He also approached Arjun Singh's supporters and said that great injustice had been done to Arjun Singh and that Digvijay would be the first to nominate his name for the Rajya Sabha.

But sadly it doesn't look as if his efforts are going to amount to much. Digvijay has been operating on a 'need to know' basis, but eve-

CHECK-LIST

Unlikely friends: politics leads to strange alliances

■ **Sitaram Kesri and Sharad Pawar:** The two fought against each other in the AICC plenary and for posts in the party. But they have joined forces temporarily, because they face a common threat: the Lady of 10 Janpath.

■ **[illegible] and [illegible] Swamy:** Swamy was the [illegible] against her, and went so far as to [illegible] sanction for her prosecution. For [illegible] hold back the vitriol [illegible] chief minister. Now the [illegible] because [illegible] knows a lot about [illegible].

■ **[illegible] and [illegible] Nabi Azad:** Have been rivals for years, [illegible] during the time both were Rajya Sabha members from Maharashtra. But they [illegible] themselves on [illegible] ground as both have [illegible].

■ **[illegible] and [illegible]:** While Sampath [illegible]

ryone has got to know what he's trying to do. And when the time comes to act, Digvijay will perish in the world.

Story of a politician

How it [illegible] of [illegible]

Gajapathy was the official Congress candidate from Berhampore [illegible] for several terms. In 1991, when P.V. Narasimha Rao wanted a seat to contest from, Gajapathy offered, very nobly, that should Rao have a problem, his own seat was always there. While Rao thanked him, he told him not to worry, that he would find a seat.

But [illegible]. And [illegible] he called Gajapathy and told him there was a [illegible] on him from the party to contest from Berhampore. Would Gajapathy [illegible] Now Gajapathy wanted the [illegible] to be taken away from him and asked plaintively, "What about me?" He was assured there was no problem and that he would be [illegible] to the Rajya Sabha.

But of course the [illegible] of the PV [illegible] came to [illegible] and there was no Rajya Sabha seat in sight. [illegible], Gajapathy left the Congress and joined the BJP.

But this was not the end of the saga. The 1996 elections came around and Gajapathy stood as a BJP candidate from the same constituency against chief minister J.B. Patnaik's wife. To Gajapathy's eternal delight, Narasimha Rao was denied a ticket.

And then, it happened again. Narasimha Rao came to the constituency and made long speeches about how he wanted the constituency to vote for his sister.

And Gajapathy lost again. ●

DELHI DIARY

Attention please!

Now that the crisis is over, the whole story can be told. Two more reasons for Jayalalitha's disaffection have come to light.

One, her birthday fell last week and no one from the BJP called to wish her happy birthday.

Two, while Mrs L.K. Advani greeted Mamata Banerjee and hugged her, she was only greeted by Sushma Swaraj, a mere general secretary of the BJP. No senior member of the BJP came to receive her at the airport.

The BJP, which has its share of temperamental women members, but no one as spectacularly moody as

Jayalalitha: moody blues

Jayalalitha, is baffled. Members say Atal Behari Vajpayee called Jayalalitha 12 times during the crisis period last week. She wouldn't even come to the telephone, so how could we have wished her happy birthday? they ask plaintively.

As for Mrs Advani, they say indignantly that L.K. Advani who is the president of the party which has more than 150 seats in the Lok Sabha hosted a lunch at his home in her honour. So if we are counting MPs, the BJP president has 170-odd MPs compared to her 27. Advani called her for a meal. So what is she grumbling about?

What indeed.

HEARD IN THE AICC OFFICE

From Atal Behral, he's become Atak Beharl.

SITARAM KESRI, WHEN THE BJP'S EFFORTS TO FORM A GOVERNMENT WERE STALLED

Pawar play

Never has Sharad Pawar been so generous. At the 10 March meeting of the CWC, when the talk veered round to who the Speaker could be, Pawar sounded surprised and even shocked. "Why are we discussing this?" he said in disingenuous tones. "It has to be Sangmaji."

Those who don't know him were immediately suspicious and on guard. Why was Pawar coming up with this *suo motu* suggestion?

Those who know him just smiled. The fact was, P.A. Sangma's name had started doing the rounds as chief of the parliamentary party, because he was considered a non-controversial winner and a Sonia Gandhi candidate. Pawar, with 33 MPs, could not afford to let this suggestion gain credibility.

Sharad Pawar fumbled, moved

FOR THE RECORD

Legal opinions on the President's dilemma: what lawyers say

Rajiv Dhavan: The Opposition should move a no-confidence motion instead of the government being subjected to a confidence-of-the-House motion. This is the only way to eliminate blackmail and horse-trading in a hung Parliament.

Subhash Kashyap: The President should call the BJP with or without Jayalalitha, because it is the single-largest party, the floor of the House is the only forum to test the majority of a government.

P.N. Lekhi: The President should have explored alternatives when it was clear that the BJP was incapable of forming a government with or without the AIADMK.

Soli Sorabjee: A composite floor test is the only way of appointing Prime Ministers in such [illegible] situations.

Arun Jaitley: The President should [illegible] because it is the single-largest party. [illegible] was invited to form the government [illegible] minority in Parliament — but [illegible] government. Never mind the [illegible]

Lonely in the House

Of all the politicians who were members of Sonia Gandhi's inner coterie, the one who was considered the political flyweight is the only one who's won the elections. Romi Chopra, Sunita Kohli, *et al* are Gandhi's non-political friends. The four said to be in the political inner coterie were Arjun Singh, N.D. Tewari, Sheila Dixit and Natwar Singh.

All of them left the Congress(I) when the party broke away on the issue of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination — they argued that Narasimha Rao's government had just not done enough to find Rajiv Gandhi's killers. They formed a parallel Congress, went out into the cold and came back on their knees.

Arjun Singh and Tewari were given Congress(I) tickets in this election. Both were considered political heavyweights.

The man whose political credentials no one took [illegible]

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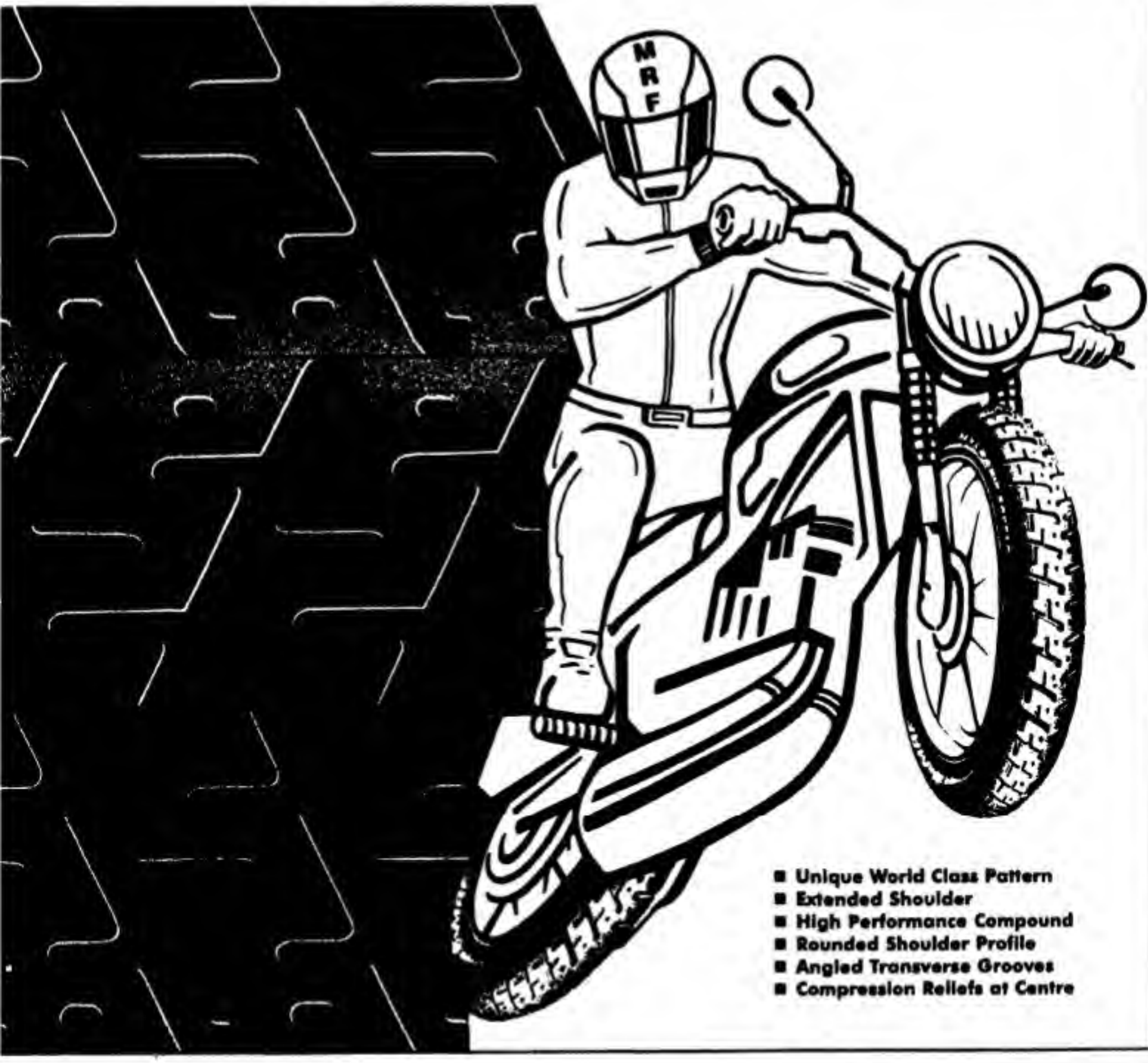

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PORTRAITS : CHILDREN AND CRIME

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"Golf is my life"

Says Firoz Ali, winner of the Classic Indian Open 40

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The public and private face of the BJP

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End of an era

E.M.S. Namboodiripad passes away

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Sense and nuisance

Trash him, bash him, but don't mess with Subramaniam Swamy

Changing colours

I agree with your observation that Chandrababu Naidu held the balance of power in the new Lok Sabha [Cover story, *Kingmaker* (15—21 March). Though the Telugu Desam Party had only 12 MPs in the last parliamentary poll, Naidu knew that the BJP would need his party's support very badly to get a simple majority and to form the government at the Centre. Hence the volte-face on the policy.

During the 17-month-old tenure of the UF, Naidu flew to Delhi everytime the UF government wobbled and he had successfully played the role of a crisis manager. And, now remaining 'neutral', Chandrababu Naidu had bailed the BJP out and helped form the government.

Bhupen Bose, Calcutta (West Bengal)

■Your cover story *Kingmaker* is extremely readable. Four days after the election results began to crystallise, it became clear that Chandrababu Naidu had to choose between the BJP and the Congress. But he refused to show his true colours. With the TDP receiving a severe jolt in the state, a shrewd Naidu knew he would have to maintain 'equidistance' both from the Congress and the BJP.

As the TDP cannot afford to cosy up to the Congress at the Centre while combating it in Andhra Pradesh, the BJP surge had lunged the party into panic. Chandrababu Naidu knew it would be suicidal to make two enemies. Hence his decision to hold the balance.

P.S. Vaidya, Pune (Maharashtra)

Chandrababu Naidu: striking the balance

No tears for Kesri

The miserable plight of Sitaram Kesri was the result of his own misdeeds. One cannot forgive Kesri for forcing an election and for the political games that he played at the cost of the country's stability. Hence his ouster from the post of Congress presidentship would hardly evoke any sympathy. ['*It's lonely at the top*' (1—7 March).

The way Kesri removed Narasimha Rao was totally uncalled for. Though charges were also levelled against Rao, it was he and Manmohan Singh who pioneered India's economic reforms. Rao never resorted to mudslinging so common among the politicians now. Apparently, in today's polity, visual appeal and charisma seem to be as important as being politically wise. Unfortunately both Kesri and Rao lack the charisma of Sonia Gandhi. It's no wonder then that Rao and Kesri had the same fate.

Nalini Sudhakaran, Trivandrum (Kerala)

■The story '*It's lonely at the top*' (1—7 March) is well-presented. The 112-year-old Congress is truly in a shambles. The Congress had always been a leader-based party. Since the days of Jawaharlal Nehru, the party hinged on the charisma of the Gandhi family and this clearly explained the frantic call to Sonia Gandhi and even Priyanka to save the party.

Finally in an intra-party coup Sonia—the most favoured mystery of Indian politics, the riddle of 10 Janpath—had taken over the reins of the Congress. Now that the BJP is in power, Sonia knew that it would pursue the Bofors cases to the hilt and she wouldn't be able

Sitaram Kesri: humiliating exit

to shield herself and her family if she stayed away from active politics.

V. Sagar, New Delhi

Stop cheating

This refers to the story *The stealing of basmati* (1—7 March). The speed with which the Indian herbs, medicinal plants and rice varieties are patented by the Americans is really shocking. Did the rice technology in the US develop any new brand of basmati which differs from that of Indian variety? They have done nothing of that sort. The rice technology in the US had been able to patent basmati and had managed to patent it, thanks to the bureaucratic bungling and government's indifference. If this is not cheating what else is?

Indian and Pakistan governments should fight this in the International Court of Justice and save the basmati from being hijacked by the US firms. Our bureaucrats should wake up before it is too late and not let the US firms get away with their dubious games. The government should prepare a catalogue of all properties which have Indian origin and stop them from being plundered.

L. Rohini, Tiruchy (Tamil Nadu)

Know thyself

Kanshi Ram's interview headlined *'The BJP is naked—stark naked'* (1 — 7 March) has exposed his real self — arrogant, boastful, revengeful, ungrateful, and opportunistic. He had called the BJP the 'maha corrupt party'. But wild allegations couldn't taint the BJP. What's the track record of Kanshi Ram's own party? During Mayawati's tenure in UP, transfers and postings virtually became tools to mint money. And the party's debacle in the last Lok Sabha polls clearly reflects the 'trust' people have in the party.

L. Sitalakshmi, Tiruppattur (Tamil Nadu)

■Politicians like Kanshi Ram feel that media is biased in any opinion poll or exit poll, if it doesn't predict favourably for their parties. They make outrageous comments that instability is in the interest of their own party. Any party that conveys such sentiments is inarguably an anti-national one. So it would be appropriate if the Bahujan Samaj Party changes its name into Bahujan *Suvidhavadi* Party.

Bedashruti Mitra, Raigarh (Madhya Pradesh)

Delicate imbalance

Your cover story, *Prime Minister* (8 — 14 March) has rightly pointed out the contradictions in the 17-party government that Vajpayee is heading. The BJP already got a rude awakening when the AIADMK leader Jayalalitha withheld the crucial 'letter of support' for four days.

While Vajpayee is insisting on 'good governance' and has put the contentious issues —uniform civil code, abrogation of Article 370 and Ayodhya — on the back burner, the Jayalalitha episode last fortnight foretold that for the Vajpayee government, it would be a tightrope walk

As Vajpayee took oath last fortnight, his heart was full of hope and good intentions. But these and the best wishes of all his supporters may not be enough for him to cope with the enormous challenge that he faces. Any coalition government will be prone to various pulls and pressures. And Vajpayee will be forced to look over his shoulder to see if his allies are with him. This is

Vajpayee: Herculean task

not the best position to be in for a Prime Minister committed to a stable and well-directed government.

Samir Chakraborty, Howrah (West Bengal)

Saving temples

This refers to the story *Saving grace* (1 — 7 March). While most of the Hindus are unconcerned about the pitiable condition of some of the Hindu temples, the efforts of Yasin Pathan in his native village of Pathra in the Midnapore district of West Bengal should be a lesson to all the Hindus. Yasin deserves the gratitude of all the Hindus for coming to the rescue of the temples and saving them from destruction. Yasin's initiative to form a 'temple protection committee' in his village is truly commendable.

All the state governments should take steps in forming such committees to save the dilapidated temples in the country. And these committees should see that the precious sculptures, paintings, and wood carvings in the temples are saved from the vandals who steal them and sell them abroad. It's time the Central government, which spends crores of rupees in conducting Festivals of India abroad, takes adequate measures to save temples in ruins in the country.

N. Lakshmi, Panchavati (Tamil Nadu)

Jaundiced view

Your story *Cold comfort* (8 — 14 March) on the five-star hospitals is an eye-opener. But the correspondent has failed to take into account the functioning of the Escorts hospital and the doctors' behaviour with the patients there.

Barring Escorts Institute, the attiude of the doctors towards patients in most of the hospitals and nursing homes in Delhi is appalling. I spoke to several patients at Escorts Institute and they were all praise for the Institute. But how Sham Lal, former editor of *The Times of India* was turned away by Escorts is a matter to be investigated.

Gyan Bhadra, New Delhi

Contributed by Shyamal Kumar Manna, Calcutta (West Bengal)

MILESTONES

SWORN IN: BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee, as the 14th Prime Minister of India, on 19 March, in a simple ceremony at the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

WITHDRAWN: by the Haryana government, its 21-month-old ban on the sale of liquor in the state. Prohibition in Haryana will come to an end from 1 April.

DIED: veteran Left theoretician, CPI(M) leader and former Kerala

chief minister E.M.S. Namboodiripad, on 19 March, in Thiruvananthapuram, of respiratory failure. He was 89.

RESIGNED: Madhu Dandavate, from the post of deputy chairman of Planning Commission, on 19 March, immediately after the swearing in of the new BJP government at the Centre.

RESIGNED: Uttar Pradesh Governor Romesh Bhandari, on 16 March, after President K.R. Narayanan invited the Bharatiya Janata Party to form the government.

[illegible] by the State [illegible] on 16 March.

SIGHT & SOUND

KESHAV/THE HINDU

■ Our missiles can reach any city of India.

ABDUL QADER KHAN, *Pakistan's leading nuclear scientist, pointing out that his country was capable of responding to any challenge*

■ Our consensus was genuine while theirs is pseudo.

V.N. GADGIL, *Congress spokesman, commenting on the consensus approach taken by the BJP*

■ We will try our best to mobilise secular and democratic forces to defeat the BJP in Lok Sabha.

JYOTI BASU, *veteran CPI(M) leader and West Bengal chief minister, on the UF's strategy before the vote of confidence*

■ I shall be guided by the AIADMK leader and do whatever she says. My relationship with Mr Vajpayee has come to zero from minus, from reverse gear to neutral. I hope it moves to first.

SUBRAMANIAM SWAMY, *Janata Party leader, on his relationship with J. Jayalalitha and Atal Behari Vajpayee*

■ The Telugu Desam should be expelled for disrupting the unity of the United Front.

MULAYAM SINGH YADAV, *Samajwadi Party president*

■ I worked in the most impartial manner and no one can have complaints about my conduct.

ROMESH BHANDARI, *former UP Governor, after his resignation*

■ I can talk English, I can walk English, and now I can even sing English.

GOVINDA, *film actor*

SEEN

NO MOODY BLUES

Smiling, the finance minister bids adieu to his 18-month office

V RAJAGOPAL

GOODBYE, MR FM: *Chidambaram's last day in office*

The desk was as spic and span as the man who sat behind it. (Ever thought of offering P. Chidambaram the Surf advert?) The room had been cleared of all personal belongings two weeks ago. There was nothing of the (former) finance minister in the room — save the man himself. And the big smile on his face.

That was a shock. This was not the tall, dark and moody finance minister bidding a somewhat tearful farewell to his office of 18 months. Not this cheerful chap debating the merits of his white *veshti* and shirt versus the 'normal' clothes — a red T-shirt and blue jeans — that he could wear now if he so chose.

"You'll look quite decent in that," we observed, we thought, quite reasonably.

"Why? Do I look indecent now?" he countered, very unreasonably.

Depressed? As he bid goodbye to his office, this finance minister made it clear that he wasn't crying over the lost treasure. In fact, he said, he was looking forward to unpacking the real loot — the stash of luscious chocolates in his fridge at home.

"So, what will you do now?" we asked.

"What do you mean?" He sounded surprised. "I'll be there in the Lok Sabha. You'll see me there."

There was an unsigned letter on his desk. Did all ministers have to sign a letter of resignation when the government quit office?

The letter on Chidambaram's desk was addressed to the outgoing Prime Minister, wishing him luck. He signed it at 4.55 pm.

Five minutes later, there was a knock on the door. Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Shanker Acharya and N. Ramchandran entered. They had come to escort Chidambaram — the finance minister, now the ex-finance minister — to his farewell party.

P. Chidambaram waved and left.

That's the way to say Goodbye. •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

This was not the tall, dark and moody finance minister bidding a somewhat tearful farewell to his office

E.M.S. Namboodiripad

1909 — 1998

The great thing about E.M.S. Namboodiripad was that he wore his greatness so lightly. When a person dies, the encomiums come pouring in. But Elamkulam Manakkal Sankaran Namboodiripad, or "Comrade EMS", as he was affectionately and universally known, was different. Long before he breathed his last, suddenly and without fuss, on the afternoon of 19 March, 1998, he had carved his place in history and had become the stuff legends are made of.

And yet, he never rested on his laurels, never acquired the airs that power and adulation bring, never ceased for a moment his lifelong struggle to build a just and humane world, and never gave up the commitment and hope that drew him to Marxism well over half-a-century ago.

Born on 14 June, 1909, he belonged to an era of idealism and struggle, coming of age when Gandhiji's first non-cooperation movement of 1920-21 was drawing young men and women all across the country. But his political initiation, through the field of social reform, had begun much earlier.

Born in a high-caste feudal family which owned vast tracts of land, EMS was influenced very early by the movement for reforms in the family, marriage and property system in the Namboodiri community. While his older brothers were sent to schools imparting modern education, EMS recalls in his autobiography that he was considered "too intelligent" to be condemned to such "inferior education" and was "directed to confine myself to the study of Sanskrit *kavyas* starting with the Rig Veda".

But this could not quieten his searching mind nor make him indifferent to the rampant inequality he saw all around him. At the age of 14, he started working as the secretary of the local unit of the Namboodiri Yogakshema Sabha, his first apprenticeship with social work.

He started his formal education only in 1925 but within a few days was recognised as a "bright student". In school itself, he knew what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. In the fifth form, all the students had to choose an optional subject — either mathematics or history. All the bright boys were expected to choose maths. But EMS chose history.

In his reminiscences, EMS wrote: "Why did I choose history? Because my little acquaintance with the social movement and with the Congress activities had led me to the conclusion that I should develop myself as a public worker. Reform of the customs and manners of the high-caste Hindu society and the struggle for the country's freedom became the two passions which moved me. Since I had to equip myself for work in this direction, I decided that those subjects which help me in this should be my optional subjects."

This young student of history was to become one of the best historians this country has ever produced — writing not just the masterly *History of Kerala* and the *History of the Freedom Struggle*, but penetrating analyses of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Marxist philosophy.

But he was not content to be merely a writer of history but an active participant, who devoted himself to both thought and action. He left college in 1931 to become a full-time Congress worker, was jailed in the second Civil Disobedience Movement, was one of the founders of the Congress Socialist Party in Kerala, and having become acquainted with Marxism in this period, was one of the five members who formed the founding group of the Communist Party in Kerala in 1936.

EMS was first elected to the Madras Provincial Legislative Assembly in 1939 and headed the first elected communist government in the world when he became chief minister of Kerala in 1957. Elected to the central committee of the CPI as far back as 1941, he was later general secretary of the united CPI in 1962. After the party split in 1964, EMS was in the first nine-member Politburo of the CPI(M) and was general secretary of the party from 1977 to 1992.

Impressive as the biography is, the uniqueness of EMS' life and contribu-

tion does not lie in the posts he held, nor in the many firsts he achieved — the first elected communist leader, the first state government which was dismissed under Article 356, the first leader to head a coalition government in India, the first chief minister to usher in the most extensive land reforms and educational reforms that radically changed the face of Kerala. Rather, what makes EMS one of the outstanding figures of the communist movement and one of the tallest political leaders produced in India was his unique capacity to pursue the cerebral and the practical, combine the abstruse and the mundane, blend thought and action, theory and practice.

EMS has long been acknowledged a brilliant Marxist theoretician but despite his prodigious reading and prolific pen, he did not become, as so many have before and since, an ivory-tower intellectual. His superb grasp of theory did not turn him towards the abstract. His interest always lay in the concrete, in the here and now, in the world around him — and how to change it for the better.

It is not insignificant that the first article he ever wrote which appeared in the organ of the Namboodiri Yogakshema Sabha was titled 'The French Revolution and the Namboodiri Community'. The content, he wrote later, was an explanation of the revolution in general — "root and branch change in society" — which the French Revolution was and the topicality of such "root and branch change" reforms in the Namboodiri community.

This trait — to apply the knowledge gained from books to practice of social, to pursue one's revolutionary idealism by working with the people, going to the people — was to last throughout his life. And so, even as his health failed, his mind remained ever agile, and hours before he died, EMS dictated an article on the present political situation and the tasks ahead.

But what endeared EMS to the millions of humble peasants and workers not only in his home state but in different parts of the country was his unpretentious simplicity. Some have called him the last Gandhian, but EMS' simplicity in some ways went beyond the Gandhian framework.

His simple, even austere lifestyle, was not a statement of any kind. It came to him very naturally. Devoted to the cause he never ceased to believe in, dedicated completely to the task of party-building, EMS simply did not care for the trappings of power or wealth. All that mattered to him was the world of ideas and the arena of struggle.

And yet it would be wrong to think of him as a dour, humourless man who had no interst outside politics. He was interested in everything around him and is considered an expert on Malayalam language and literature. A true Marxist that he was, EMS had an abiding interest in philosophy, literature and history. Though not part of his early Marxist education, EMS in recent years was reading and writing on later Marxists such as Antonio Gramsci.

As for his humour, any reporter who had the privilege of covering EMS' press conferences can never forget his biting wit. There is, of course, that famous, possibly apocryphal, story of the cheeky reporter who asked EMS, "Comrade, do you always stammer?" And quick came the reply, "No, only when I speak." There are many more. Once, the story goes, EMS was at a dinner and was hesitatingly asked, "Do you eat beef?" To which the veteran leader replied, "I eat anything which doesn't eat me."

EMS may have had a prolific pen, but he was not a garrulous man. At his press conferences, he never said a word more than he wanted to. When reporters tried to corner him, he replied on more than one occasion, "You can ask me the same question in three different ways, but the answer is still no." And when a persistent scribe attributed a hidden meaning to a particular formulation in the press communique, EMS said, "I have heard that journalists read between the lines. But this is a case of reading where no lines exist!"

E.M.S. Namboodiripad was an extraordinary man with extraordinary discipline who combined a brilliant mind with an unswerving dedication to the cause of social change. Words like dedication and commitment no longer have any value in the times we live in, except when used in the context of securing personal success, wealth or fame. It is easier for the ideologues of our 'me first' generation to damn the likes of EMS as 'dogmatic' only because they choose to live and die for an ideal greater than themselves. But beyond the immediacy of sound-bite celebritydom, it is perhaps persons like EMS whose memories would endure and inspire even if the ideal they fought for appears still distant. •

Manini Chatterjee

(From left) EMS, Saroj Mukherjee, Jyoti Basu and other CPI(M) leaders: end of an era

INDER MALHOTRA

Transition point

China enters a critical phase

China's leadership that will take the world's most populous country and rising power into the next millennium has been "elected". By an interesting coincidence, this has been accompanied by the sudden dropping, at the UN Human Rights Commission's session at Geneva, of the annual resolution condemning the Chinese human rights record. What is more, US President Bill Clinton has taken the opportunity to announce that he is "advancing" his visit to the People's Republic from November to June.

All this, along with the earlier wooing of Beijing by Tokyo and Moscow, should persuade the incoming government in this country to take greater interest in our mighty neighbour than has been the case so far, despite a steady but extremely slow improvement in India-China relations.

The leadership line-up in China had been decided months earlier by the Chinese Communist Party which refuses to relax its political control. As expected, therefore, Jiang Zemin has been confirmed as the country's President for a second term. Since he has been re-elected chairman of the Military Control Commission also and continues to be secretary-general of the Communist Party, his primacy among "equals" is manifest.

Li Peng, having completed his two terms as Prime Minister, has moved to the chairmanship of the National People's Congress from which Jiang has smoothly eased out his potential rival, Qiao Shi, who had earlier been ousted from the Communist Party's politburo and the central committee. Li may no longer be Prime Minister but it should not be overlooked that he continues to be number two in the Communist Party hierarchy.

The centrepiece of the leadership changes, of course, is the elevation of Zhu Rongji, hitherto the Economic Csar, to the post of Prime Minister. As news reports have emphasised, he is highly talented but a tough and no-nonsense man. He does not suffer fools gladly and is known to have sacked incompetent or obstructionist officials on the spot. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, he is very highly regarded, if only because his success so far has been remarkable. He has controlled China's runaway inflation without slowing down its economic growth.

Next to Zhu the man to watch is Hu Jintu, the youngest member of the seven-man standing committee of the Chinese politburo, who has been elected vice-president. Under him, this ceremonial post is expected to be upgraded and he is clearly seen as Jiang's successor and China's "fourth-generation" leader, after Mao, Deng and Jiang.

The key question is whether China's leadership and polity are now stabilised under Jiang's leadership, and fears of chaos in the post-Deng era belied. The jury is divided. The majority of China-watchers across the world believes that the new leadership is not just in the saddle but also in control. The dissenting minority thinks the future is uncertain because China is entering a critical transition and not merely because of the South-East Asian meltdown. It has to contend with massive unemployment, loss-making public undertakings, 200 billion dollars of bad debts and so on.

As it happnes, China's ambassador to this country, Pei Yuanying, finished his tenure on the day Zhu was elected premier. He is being succeeded by another old South Asia hand, Zhou Gang, currently ambassador to Indonesia and formerly envoy to Pakistan.•

Chinese President Jiang Zemin (left) with former PM Li Peng

The incoming government in this country should take greater interest in China than has been the case so far, despite a steady but extremely slow improvement in Indo-Chinese relations

RAJIV SHUKLA

On tenterhooks

The bureaucracy awaits a shake-up after the BJP government's floor test

Several Governors and top bureaucrats are on tenterhooks as the new government is likely to go for a major reshuffle after the vote of confidence. While the deputy chairman of the Planning Commission along with members have already resigned, the attorney-general, the solicitor-general and three additional solicitors-general too would be replaced as per convention.

Though Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has taken a liberal approach in trying to accommodate everyone, the BJP think-tank and RSS hardliners are of the opinion that there should be a complete purge and a good number of like-minded people should be absorbed in the government. They think that after 50 years of independence, the BJP (formerly the Jana Sangh) has managed to capture power and it should not ignore the supporters who had been waiting for decades to rule New Delhi.

P.V. Narasimha Rao had set a precedent by not recalling the Governors after the change of government and allowed them to complete their tenures. But BJP leaders are in favour of changing most of them. Ironically, its partners in the government are also in favour of replacing the Governors with their choices.

Governors on extension, too, are anathema to the BJP. Six Governors are presently serving as 'daily wagers' as the crisis-driven United Front could find little time to formally extend their terms or replace them. They are P.C. Alexander (Maharashtra), Mohammad Shafi Qureshi (Madhya Pradesh), K.V. Raghunath Reddy (West Bengal), A.R. Kidwai (Bihar), O.N. Srivastava (Nagaland) and Mata Prasad (Arunachal Pradesh).

The BJP's Suraj Bhan is lobbying hard for the governorship of Uttar Pradesh. The new government would have immediately sacked Romesh Bhandari had he not resigned. Now, Gujarat Governor K.P. Singh is also on the hit list as he went out of his way to support Shankersinh Vaghela.

Ouster of the four UF appointees — Singh, Gen. (retd) S.K. Sinha (Assam), Fathima Beevi (Tamil Nadu) and Sukhdev Singh Kang (Kerala) — has also become imperative. Going out on the 'Congress government appointees' clause are Mahavir Prasad (Haryana) and K.R. Ramanujam (Orissa). Both still have more than a year to go. The axe is out for veteran Rajendra Kumari Bajpai (Pondicherry) who has less than a year left, as also for Baliram Bhagat in Rajasthan.

Though Prime Minister Vajpayee has taken a liberal approach in trying to accommodate everyone, the BJP and RSS hardliners are in favour of a complete purge

The new government is all set for a major bureaucratic reshuffle. Though Vajpayee has already initiated the exercise in consultation with his principal secretary Brajesh Mishra and private secretary Shakti Sinha, secretary-level changes are not likely to take place before the crucial trial of strength.

Vajpayee, however, has announced the name of Prabhat Kumar as the new Cabinet secretary. The CBI director, D.R. Karthikeyan, is due to retire on 31 March. He is unlikely to be given another extension. IB director Arun Bhagat will be retiring on 30 April and Vajpayee is in no mood to replace him before that either. Though several IPS officers of the 1963 and 1964 batch are vying for the post, the PM has almost decided to promote someone from within the organisation, most likely the special director, Shyamal Dutta.

For the CBI director's job, the race is only between special director Trinath Mishra and special secretary to the ministry of home affairs, Mukund Behari Kaushal. A new commissioner for the Vigilance Commission will also be appointed. Though former CBI director Joginder Singh is lobbying hard for the post, the IAS lobby is not in favour of giving it to IPS officers.

More than ten secretaries will be shifted to different departments. The fates of the finance and revenue secretaries will be decided by finance minister Yashwant Sinha and that too after the Finance Bill is passed. Both may be retained. •

The Hiccups

V RAJAGOPAL

Despite speed-breakers, the BJP-led coalition is well on the road to governing India

And After

Muktar Abbas Naqvi was exhausted but happy. He had come to Delhi after getting the certificate which proclaimed him the Member of Parliament from Rampur. He'd managed to trounce the Begum of Rampur who had held the seat for the Congress for every election since the death of Mickey Mian, her husband. He was on top of the world.

But there was an air of uncertainty in Delhi. While the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was set to form a government, the pressure from allies was so much that it was clear only a few from the BJP could hope to become ministers. Naqvi firmly quashed the glimmer of hope that he might be one of the favoured ones. He and his pals from the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch had late dinner. Then he got into a three-wheeler and went to a relative's home in east Delhi to spend the night. He didn't bother to tell the BJP office where he was. He didn't really believe anyone would want to contact him.

But by some foresight, Naqvi left his mobile phone on. The phone rang at about 1.00 am that night. It was a call from 7 Safdarjung Road. *"Atalji baat karenge,"* barked the voice at the other end.

Naqvi was told he should come to Safdarjung Road immediately. He got up, washed in the middle of the night, put on his *achkan* and made a relative drive him. He was told he was being made a minister and that he should present himself at Rashtrapati Bhavan the next morning. He thanked Atal Behari Vajpayee, returned home and waited for dawn to break.

Naqvi was one of the lucky ones. So was Uma Bharti, MP from Khajuraho, who was so sure she wasn't getting a ministership that she went off to see the *Titanic* in a Delhi cinema hall the evening The Call came. And at the oath-taking the next morning, many who hadn't been sworn in were heard telling each other philosophically: *"Hamne apna kaam to kar diya. Ab bhagwan ke haath main hai* (We did our duty Now it is in the hands of God)."

There was, however, one name which was called out the next day, which God had little to do with. This was Yashwant Sinha's. When portfolios were announced it was the MP from Hazaribagh who was given finance. This would have been an

TOPSY-TURVY

The BJP-Jayalalitha relationship

It has been a relationship where rebounds have been a recurring factor. It has also been one where others have taken the lead over dramatis personae in guiding the nature of the relationship. Even after assuaging 'Madam', the BJP remains on tenterhooks because of the AIADMK's penchant for being a spoilsport once again.

It was sometime in the summer of 1992 that BJP general secretary K.N. Govindacharya, after being shunted out of Delhi by then party president Murli Manohar Joshi, opened parleys with a slightly-peeved-with-Rao Jayalalitha. Then staying at Gurumurthy's Madras residence, the BJP leader was aided in his mission by the redoubtable Cho Ramaswamy.

Jayalalitha had nothing to lose by pulling up an erring Narasimha Rao so that he could not continue ignoring her. Govindacharya had also nothing to lose but win some more kudos by making an unlikely ally during a 'punishment posting'. While the round of political flirtation 'corrected' the Congress government's attitude towards the AIADMK, Govindacharya's supporters in Delhi were quick to say that their leader could win people over even in hell.

But, by the time the elections were declared in 1996, the bonhomie between the BJP and Jayalalitha had disappeared. Govindacharya was back in Delhi — rehabilitated by L.K. Advani — and Rao decided to ignore charges of corruption against Jayalalitha and forged an alliance with her party despite desertions by Moopanar and co.

But when Jayalalitha found the going tough after her electoral rout in 1996 and the political marginalisation and bureaucratic witch-hunting, she found a shoulder to lean on: the BJP. By the time the polls were announced late last year, the alliance between the two parties had been more or less sealed despite some reservations in sections within the BJP which could not foresee the changing electoral mood of the voter in Tamil Nadu.

But the BJP erred after the results were declared. The first mistake was not to give Jayalalitha the feel of a prima donna; it instead gave greater importance to allies with lesser numbers. To add to Jayalalitha's anger, the party leadership sent "that chit of a girl" (Sushma Swaraj) to receive Amma when she first came to Delhi on 9 March. To add insult to injury, Jayalalitha was not allowed her due share during the meeting with allies on the question of the National Agenda.

The rest of it is known: how the BJP leaders spent one of the uneasiest Holis ever; how the delayed letter finally reached the President but only after he talked to Jayalalitha over the phone.

What, however, is not known is the key role played by certain industrial groups in bringing about the truce between the two allies. Sensing that the industry was keen to see a BJP government in office, the party, for once, preferred to take the backseat as Jayalalitha went 'underground' while sulking. Instead, the negotiators were key officials of a major industrial group with significant interest in the petroleum sector. The group is also known for aiding the BJP on previous occasions, the first instance being during resource mobilisation for L.K. Advani's first Rath Yatra in 1990.

But did not the *sangh parivar* allow itself to be dictated by the industrial group when after the imbroglio was sorted out the AIADMK bagged the petroleum ministry? When asked, an activist of the *sangh* said candidly: "Like everyone else, we are also learning the ways of pragmatic politics."

V RAJAGOPAL

(From left) Advani, Vajpayee and Jayalalithaa: balancing act

The BJP made the mistake of not giving Jayalalitha the feel of a prima donna

unexceptionable choice, had it not been for two things: one, that Yashwant Sinha was appointed because as finance minister in the Chandra Shekhar government, he was seen as having a background in the ministry. Unfortunately, not so long ago, in Parliament, L.K. Advani had denounced the Chandra Shekhar regime as being the "most corrupt government India had ever had". So what kind of signal was the BJP sending?

Two, Jaswant Singh, the MP from Chittorgarh who lost the election this time, was considered the natural choice for the job. That though Vajpayee wanted to appoint him, but couldn't is a story which tells India how badly hamstrung the central government is going to be in the months to come.

Atal Behari Vajpayee being sworn in: taking fresh guard

No one thought Jaswant Singh, one of Atal Behari Vajpayee's closest friends and a confidant of Rajasthan chief minister Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, would lose the election. Though he was up against a formidable rival — Uday Lal Anjana of the Congress(I), who is both wealthy and resourceful — the BJP never imagined that the incumbency factor would have such a terrible backlash.

But the warning signals were there for everyone to see during the campaign. Wherever Anjana went campaigning, a truck with a drilling machine would follow him. In arid Chittorgarh, especially in villages which had no water, he would tell the villagers: "No water? What's the problem? I will get you water now." He would get the drilling machine into action, drill a bore-well right there and set up a hand-pump. The cost, by his standards, was negligible. The price was paid by the BJP. Jaswant Singh lost the elections.

When Singh returned to Delhi, he found he had company. Pramod Mahajan had lost the Lok Sabha election as well. Mahajan, however, was on a different trip. Trying to turn a necessity into a virtue, Mahajan collared every reporter he could find and told them: "Two things are certain: one, that Atalji is being sworn in; two, that I'm not." He also said that his defeat was the black mark on the BJP which would protect it from the evil eye (*'maine BJP ke liye nazar ke teeke ka kaam kiya hai'*).

Jaswant Singh, the taste of defeat still acrid in his mouth, was not given to these acrobatics. Too gentlemanly to make his distaste obvious, he got down to the behind-the-scenes work that had suddenly descended on the BJP — the drafting of the National Agenda, briefing correspondents, etc.

Vajpayee was determined to keep Jaswant Singh in the government. When the proposal was sent to him, Singh declined politely. He had lost the election. He had no business being in government.

Vajpayee persisted. When L.K. Advani tried to counsel Vajpayee, the Prime Minister designate told Advani plainly that he wanted Jaswant Singh as finance minister, failing which he would like Advani.

Meanwhile, the Jayalalitha-crisis broke. Jaswant Singh had known Jayalalitha since 1980 when she was removed from her post as propaganda secretary of the AIADMK and was sent to the Rajya Sabha as a punishment by MGR for trying to overreach herself. Now, clearly, communication between the AIADMK and the BJP had broken down and was in the danger of collapsing altogether. Some urgent crisis-management was needed.

Singh was flown down to Madras and found Jayalalitha sulky. He told her courteously but plainly what he thought her political options were. She could either help the BJP form the government, or he would tell Vajpayee not to make a bid for the government at all.

He told her that the balance of political advantage was with her, whether she decided to go with the BJP or the Congress — but she had to decide which she wanted to back. Her concerns were already there in the BJP's manifesto. If it was the BJP, she could even consider joining the government.

But nobody has asked me, said Jayalalitha plaintively.

Jaswant Singh said he would correct the situation immediately. He called Vajpayee and explained to him that he had prevailed upon Jayalalitha and wanted Vajpayee to offer her party a ministership. The pact was signed, sealed and delivered.

Vajpayee thought that Jaswant

ALIPINDER SHARMA

Singh's diplomacy would provide him some leverage in arguing. This was not the case.

The swearing in was scheduled for 19 March. Just before this, Samata Party's George Fernandes gave an interview to a Hindi newspaper, in which he said that he was considering staying out of the government. He was asked why. He said that if those who had lost the elections were going to be given ministerships, it would be like opening a Pandora's box. Every party would push its case to include ex-MPs in the government. In that event there would be grave danger to the BJP government.

The news of this interview reached Vajpayee. There was fresh panic at 7 Safdarjung Road. The same night, on 18 March, K. Sudarshan, the go-between for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the BJP (*see adjoining story*), called on Vajpayee. This was the clincher. Though Vajpayee still said he would keep finance, the finance portfolio was finally given to Yashwant Sinha.

What does all this mean for the longevity of the government? Maybe nothing, because this bickering will soon be forgotten. But there is still much to look forward to, especially vignettes from the ministers.

V RAVIKUMAR

That Vajpayee had to appoint Yashwant Sinha (seated), and not Jaswant Singh (inset), finance minister, tells India how badly hamstrung the central government is going to be in the months to come

Consider this one:

George Fernandes took over as minister and the defence ministry sent him a bulletproof car as a matter of course. Fernandes took one look at the car and said: "I don't want this. Please send me an ordinary one."

So, an ordinary car was despatched to his home. When he had finished his first day in office and came down to return home, the driver of his ordinary Ambassador held the door open for him. The defence secretary got into the back seat, but Fernandes stopped to give some last-minute instructions to one of his staff.

He then got into the car, but sat down in the *front* seat next to the driver. Embarrassed, the driver scrambled out and made as if to open the door to the back seat. Fernandes smiled and said gently: "*Rahne deejiye. Secretary sahib ko peeche baithna chahiye* (Let it be. Secretary sahib should sit at the back)."

Whether defence secretary Ajit Kumar caught the nuance of the put down or not, others did.

This government means business, whether we like it or not. And in this government, it is clearly the RSS and the *swadeshi* lobbies which are in the driving seat — whether we like it or not. •

Hiranjan Mukhopadhyay and Anuja Pande/New Delhi

These are the men — and women — who matter in the BJP

The Backroom Boys

A new government means new names and new faces. But when a party like the BJP emerges on centre-stage, things are not so clear cut. Besides the visible public faces, there are many other crucial behind-the-scenes players. The Vajpayees, Advanis, Rajju Bhaiyyas and Ashok Singhals are well-known. But, there are many more in the sangh parivar *whose influence on the government will be significant.* SUNDAY *profiles some of the key behind-the-scenes players. They are the ones who will make sure the coalition holds together. They are The Backroom Boys.*

Suresh Rao Ketkar

Despite his Brahminical tag, he is well-versed with the changing social composition of the political structure

● Adversaries would call him an important man by default. Representative of the traditional Chittapavan Brahmin leadership of the RSS, Ketkar derives his power simply by being the key man at the right place: Lucknow.

With Rajendra Singh emerging as the first *sarsanghchalak* of the RSS taking an active interest in day-to-day politics, it is only natural that the strongman gives prime attention to his home state: UP. Given the strategic importance of UP in the *sangh parivar's* long term scheme of things, Ketkar as one of the three *sah sarkayavaha* will be the central figure in the next few months.

Though basically functioning from the *sarsanghchalak's* office, no move in UP will be made by any BJP leader without consulting the veteran *pracharak*. His Brahminical tag notwithstanding, Ketkar is well-versed with the changing social composition of the political structure and there are very few BJP leaders who would risk rubbing him the wrong way.

Sushil Modi

With the BJP's good showing in Bihar, his talents are being matched with increasing recognition within the party

● Part of the new generation of BJP leaders, Modi has everything going for him at the moment: age, caste background, ability to attract crowds, an astute mind, and, above all, the right connections within the party.

Modi first came to limelight in the early 1990s — first by giving the right push to the BJP in Bihar and later by his dour defence of Govindacharya during the latter's 'problem years' with then party president Murli Manohar Joshi. A protege of Govindacharya, Modi was initiated into politics through the ABVP during the anti-Emergency struggle.

Modi, at 42, has all the time in the world. With the good showing of the BJP in Bihar, Modi's talents are being matched with increasing recognition within the party. Said to have once stated that the two biggest influences on his life were Swami Vivekananda and Govindacharya, Modi had clashed bitterly with Vajpayee over his mentor's humiliation when the issue came to the fore at a party conclave in Gandhinagar in early 1992.

WOMEN POWER

The Mahila Morcha of the BJP has its own agenda

[illegible] are private without a chic. And [illegible] thought that the BJP's [illegible] was an innocuous [illegible] trying to make a modest [illegible] to the women's [illegible] or for that matter their [illegible] status.

[illegible] BJP's national [illegible] the [illegible] doing an overriding [illegible] campaigning, the [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] party. They [illegible] the increase.

[illegible] to analyse the [illegible] [illegible] that [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] Lanaye. (The festival of [illegible] was on, so we [illegible] would [illegible] people's [illegible] [illegible] and [illegible] politics)," says Mridula Sinha, president of the Mahila Morcha.

There's more to the revolution the Mahila Morcha intends to bring about — and not just via the [illegible] either.

The Mahila Morcha has other missions as well. The list includes distributing unadulterated *sindoor* and *bindi* made of home-made glue.

The BJP has been talking about *nari shakti* — women's empowerment. But how they plan to bring about gender equality is clearly something they haven't really given much thought to. Between 1996 and 1998, the number of women MPs in the BJP increased by one — from 14 to 15.

Mridula Sinha's own contribution to the empowerment of Indian women is set out in her book, *Neither Puppet Nor Butterfly (NPNB)*. In the chapter entitled 'Bangles: Symbol Of Women's Strength', she observes: "We must ponder over what thoughts and ideas we have imbibed about the connection that a married woman has with her bangles. Are these colourful bangles climbing in her wrist *(sic)* merely to adorn her? Surely they are not for her adornment. The vermillion in the parting of her hair and the bangles in her hand identify her married status. With the married status she is secure and happy. The society has always shown respect to one who has contributed in maintaining its

V RAJAGOPAL

Sushil Modi: Govindacharya's man

MRIDULA SINHA

"When we had only two seats in Parliament, we were the ones who used to go and ask Vajpayeeji whether he'd eaten or not"

Omkar Bhave

He is not a peace-time man and his forte is planning offensives. The BJP owes its dramatic rise greatly to him

• In terms of formal designation, he organising secretary of the BJP's UP unit is probably not considered to be a political heavyweight. Even the RSS clan — at least some sections of it — would like to downplay the significance of being Bhave. But, there is no denying that the quiet *pracharak* has the ability to pull many strings.

Besides being a master strategist, Bhave plays the vital role of liaising with units of the *sangh parivar* in foreign countries. Important for the RSS clan in the run-up to the Ayodhya campaign, the programmes of the foreign units have acquired greater significance after the formation of the BJP-led government.

Bhave is not a peace-time man and his forte is planning offensives. The BJP owes its dramatic rise greatly to Bhave as he was the main conceptualiser of the programme that gave the Ayodhya agitation a mass character leading to unprecedented electoral growth of the BJP in 1989: the *shila pujan* programme. Even today senior BJP leaders confess that if the consecrated bricks with Shri Ram inscribed on them had not been carted through the country to Ayodhya, the BJP would not have been able to register the 2 to 89 quantum leap in the 1989 polls.

A no-nonsense, behind-the-scenes operator, Bhave remains the quintessential *sanghi*, preferring anonymity to grabbing headlines.

Padmanabh Acharya

He was given charge of the north-east and is now considered the main reason behind the BJP's sole win in Assam

• The quiet member of the BJP national executive from Bombay is responsible greatly for the spread of the BJP in a most unlikely area: the north-eastern states.

Like many others before him in the *sangh parivar*, Acharya had his basic grounding in the ABVP and after a few years took charge of the organisation in the 1960s. On his own initiative, Acharya started visiting the north-eastern states and began making personal friends. Over the years, Acharya kept his contacts alive and continued to "politically cultivate" those he came in contact with. Among those he drew closer to the RSS clan included Gegong Apang, whose son has joined the small clan of 'sons' in the Vajpayee ministry.

Acharya derives his power from the fact that he works without expecting any returns. Till the early 1990s, he was hardly known in the BJP circles and it is only recently that he was formally given charge of the north-eastern states. Now being considered the main reason behind

RELIGION NO BAR

The Muslim face of the BJP

When Arif Baig quit the BJP two years ago, he had said, "*Mein to namak ki handi mein paani ki tarah tha — namak ki karvahat kum karne ke liye* (I was like water in a pot of salt — to reduce the bitterness of the salt)."

His statement said everything about the change in the attitude of the Muslims within the BJP. The few Muslims that the party has are not prepared to lie down and play dead anymore. In response, what the BJP is trying to sell to the Muslims outside applies to the leaders within — '*Babri nahi, barabari chahiye* (We want equality not Babri).'

And signs of an imminent power struggle have started to show.

During the 13-day government of the BJP, Sikander Bakht was the first to rebel — unhappy with the portfolio, Bakht sulked till he was given what he wanted. The only senior Muslim leader available, the BJP could not afford to lose him.

However, the BJP has now added Muktar Abbas Naqvi to its list of minority leaders. At 38, Naqvi, a first-time MP from Rampur, is a member of the BJP national executive as well. He has also been sworn in as the minister of state for information and broadcasting (I&B). Given his minority status, the BJP has to pamper him. What also goes in his favour is the fact that he defeated Noor Bano in Rampur, a Congress bastion.

Naqvi has a different explanation: "Minorities have realised that the BJP is an honest political friend." He says, he's done his bit. UP chief minister Kalyan Singh says approvingly of Naqvi: "Have you ever heard him speak? He sounds as if he's from the Hindu Mahasabha."

Besides, Shah Navaz Husain was the BJP's sole win in Assam and for party candidates coming second in ten other constituencies in the north-eastern states, Acharya would play a significant role in both formulating policy guidelines for administering the 'seven sisters' and also shaping the future destiny of the BJP in the region.

MUKTAR ABBAS NAQVI

Muktar Abbas Naqvi is a member of the BJP national executive. He has also been sworn in as the minister of state for I&B. "Minorities have realised that the BJP is an honest political friend," he says

K. Sudarshan

He believes that while the BJP can never speak the language of the RSS, it can reflect the ideology of the *sangh*

● With the formation of a BJP-led government at the Centre, this *sah sarkayavaha* (joint general secretary) of the RSS prepares to play one of his most crucial roles in the *sangh parivar*. Personally deputed by the *sarsanghchalak* — Rajendra Singh — to liaise with the BJP and the government, Sudarshan will be playing the role of a pivot: feeding ammunition, guiding the flow of events and keeping the house in order.

Having spent virtually a lifetime in the RSS clan, Sudarshan — now in his early 60s — the 'big brother' from Nagpur will keep a hawk's eye on the government. He is tipped to become the next general secretary of the RSS after current incumbent H.V. Sheshadari.

A Tamilian Brahmin, he represents the new face of the RSS that is media savvy. He has played a crucial role within the BJP from 1995 onwards when the RSS started involving itself directly with the party by holding training sessions for legislators and key leaders of different state units. Sudarshan was the lead 'indoctrinator' at all the conclaves starting from Virar in 1995 to Jhinjholi, the last one held on the eve of the 1998 polls.

A pragmatic person by nature, Sudarshan believes that while the BJP can never speak the language of the RSS, it can however, be made to reflect the ideology of the *sangh*. A hard negotiator who rarely likes his diktat being disobeyed, Sudarshan will in all likelihood be responsible for the limited elbow room that Vajpayee will have.

Sikander Bakht

appointed secretary of the BJP's youth wing by Uma Bharti. A non-entity till some time back, having found a footing in the party, Husain was also given a ticket from Kishanganj constituency in Bihar. Kishanganj has the largest Muslim electorate. Despite that, Husain ended third in a triangular contest. Husain contends that had senior leaders paid some more attention he could have even won.

Though the exact figures are not available, there is clearly a change in the Muslims' perception of the BJP — in many constituencies, Muslims have voted the BJP or its allies to power. But oddly enough, though the Muslims seem to want to vote for the BJP, the party is either not interested or is uneasy about fielding Muslim candidates. In the last elections, the BJP put up three Muslims. This time that number has gone up to five.

However, the BJP has already dropped Uniform Civil Code, Article 370 and the Ayodhya issue from its National Agenda. For a government precariously balanced on delicate coalitions and partnerships, the BJP is seen as going soft on its Hindutva slogan.

And till such time that the BJP has to wrestle with a fractured mandate, this could well be a facade.

Aanjo Francis/New Delhi

A.B. Vajpayee with RSS leaders: training ground

Dattopant Baburao Thengadi

He will be a key player in the coming months for his unmatched understanding of coalition politics

● The brain behind the *sangh parivar's* forays into trade unionism and the founder of the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangha Sabha, Thengadi will be a key player in the coming months for his unmatched understanding of coalition politics. What will make the veteran's position more tempestuous is the mutual dislike he and Vajpayee share for each other.

Being the person behind the success of the *sangh parivar* in the labour movement, he was given great organisational freedom by both M.S. Golwalkar and Balasaheb Deoras. Even today, there are few within the *sangh parivar* willing to enter into an eyeball-to-eyeball encounter with Thengadi. As the main ideologue of the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch, and with pro-Manch Yashwant Sinha already at the helm of affairs in the finance ministry, Thengadi's approach towards liberalisation will provide interesting fodder given his oft-repeated views that neither capitalism nor communism was capable of uplifting the quality of life.

Thengadi's role in the current scheme of things becomes more important on account of his expertise in drawing support for the positions held by the RSS from other political organisations. The skill to deal with leaders of other parties dates back to the time in the 1960s when Golwalkar decided to free him of the Jana Sangh 'tag' in Rajya Sabha and instead let him function as an 'independent' member with the specific brief of poaching into the then emerging anti-Congress groups. In the era of coalition politics, Thengadi will find increasing callers at his Keshav Kunj abode in Delhi. What will add spice to his role is the fact that each 'consultation' that Vajpayee's party and Cabinet colleagues have with Thengadi, will ruffle the PM's feathers.

Uma Bharti: popular among the youth

Prasanna Kumar Mishra

He was the prime mover behind drawing Naveen Patnaik into the BJP camp and steering the party's tremendous showing in Orissa .

● Virtually unknown even within the party till some time ago, Mishra derives his importance for being the man who steered the party's tremendous showing in Orissa, a state considered as a 'no-win' situation for the BJP even after the 1996 polls.

General secretary (organisation) of the state unit of the BJP, Mishra's main task will be to consolidate the gains made in the recent elections. He also derives importance for being the prime mover behind the split in the JD and for drawing Naveen Patnaik into the BJP camp.

But, there are complications also as the BJP and BJD share a somewhat similar social base. Mishra's emphasis on giving the BJP a more Mandalised character in the state has found favour with the party leadership.

A strong organisational man, Mishra is still in his mid-30s and a bachelor. In the RSS since childhood he has been a whole timer for the past ten years and was recently deputed to manage the party unit in the state.

Uma Bharti

Her meteoric rise has coincided with the party's Mandalisation and her caste profile makes her an influential member of the BJP

● Has come a long way from 1989 when she was the mixed-up *sanyasin* in the Lok Sabha. Though still given to personal fancies — when other newly-elected MPs were waiting at home chewing their nails and

praying for the crucial telephone call, she was watching the *Titanic* in a Delhi cinema hall — she has matured tremendously in the past few years. Today *didi* has immense personal following among the youth in the party. Uma Bharti's meteoric rise within the party has coincided with the party's Mandalisation and her caste profile (from the backward Lodha community) makes her a certain high-profile and influential member of the BJP.

Given the first organisational responsibility by L.K. Advani when he appointed her president of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha, Bharti has displayed her ability by reviving the sagging organisation. That she is a woman makes her rise in the party all the more unique.

Her placement in the HRD ministry has, however, raised eyebrows because of her stormy relationship with Murli Manohar Joshi. One suggestion is that her positioning is deliberate because 'Nagpur' wants to keep a hawk's eye on the senior minister and this could have been best done by Bharti. Definitely a part of the core leadership of the BJP in future, she will play a very significant role both in the government and the party.

Madan Das Devi

He derives his strength from the fact that some of his proteges are now key leaders in the BJP

● Based in Calcutta, the 55-year-old Devi draws his strength from being a kind of 'elder figure' for the entire generation of the BJP's second ranking leadership. A veteran *swayamsevak*, Madan Das played a very significant — but little known role — during the anti-Emergency agitation as the organising secretary of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad.

A firm believer in Golwalkar's viewpoint that the ABVP — established in July 1948 even while the RSS remained banned after the Mahatma's assassination — was the best front organisation to draw fresh blood into the *sangh parivar*, Madan Das spent considerable time in the 1970s to attract new talent into the ABVP. With the student organisation playing a crucial role in the JP movement, the RSS stranglehold on the anti-Indira Gandhi agitation was near total and many of the young leaders handpicked by Madan Das held key positions in important states like Gujarat, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Madan Das derives his strength from the fact that proteges like K.N. Govindacharya are now key leaders of the BJP and their strength will further increase within the next decade.

Considered by many as a potential *sarsanghchalak* after Rajju Bhaiya, Madan Das has played a sobering role during times when internal conflict revolving around his proteges came to fore within the BJP in recent years. The growing clout of Madan Das within the *sangh parivar* can be gauged from the fact that he was given the all-important charge of talking to the media during the recently-concluded Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha meeting near Bangalore. This indicates the decision of the RSS leadership to take out Madan Das from the closet and give him a more public profile.

Besides the fact that the new breed of leaders of the RSS clan revere him with the same intensity as the earlier generation Vajpayee downward looked at Golwalkar and Deoras, the added advantage in Madan Das' favour is good health in an organisation that has seen senior leaders beset with a host of health problems.

LAUGHING STOCK

Some BJP Jokes

Q: Why did the BJP abandon its position on the Uniform Civil Code?
A: Because, it now has four partners: Mamata, Samata, Jaya and Lalitha.

Q: What will be one of the first few decisions taken by the new petroleum minister?
A: To rename all petrol pumps Kar Seva Ghar.

Q: What was one slogan that Uma Bharti did not dare use in Khajuraho in these elections?
A: Jai Shri Ram. (Her main opponent's name was Shri Ram.)

Q: Why did Jaswant Singh refuse the finance ministership?
A: Because he's waiting to be offered the post of Chancellor of the Exchequer.

O. Rajgopal

Though the BJP is yet to open its account in his home state, Kerala, he is respected within the party for the recent inroads it has made in the region

● For years among the few faces the BJP could show from southern India, this Rajya Sabha member from Madhya Pradesh is considered a likely choice during Vajpayee's imminent ministerial expansion.

Though the BJP is yet to open its account in his home state, Kerala, Rajgopal is respected within the party for the recent inroads it has made in the region with its aggressive campaigning on the issue of the Kerala Hindu Religious and Charitable Institutions and Endowment Act.

After having registered a significant presence in the southern states, the *sangh parivar* needs to project more personalities with whom the people can identify with. While some of them will obviously be both newcomers and recent converts, the *sangh parivar* will also empower loyalists like Rajgopal who have been with it for decades. The fact that Rajgopal does not have any controversies surrounding him is an added factor. Moreover, the shy old man does not generate jealousy of party colleagues who tend to get a bit put off by publicity-seekers.

Babulal Marandi: 'tribal mascot'

L. Ganeshan

One of the new generation of pragmatic leaders that the *sangh parivar* is positioning in key slots

● At 43, he is one of the youngest state unit presidents of the BJP. Mainly instrumental for the BJP's unexpected success in Tamil Nadu, he had found very few takers even within the party on his pre-election projections of the results. As a result, respect for him has shot up manifold, more significantly for the key role he played in assuaging the sulking Jayalalitha.

One of the new generation of pragmatic leaders that the *sangh parivar* is positioning in key slots. He is street smart with words and it is tough to pin him down. Had to even overcome opposition within the BJP to the tie-up with AIADMK on account of corruption charges against Jayalalitha. Ganeshan, however, countered allegations by arguing that though corruption was an issue, stability was of greater importance.

For years, living under the shadow of veteran BJP leader Jana Krishnamurthy, Ganeshan has finally emerged in his own right. Along with other leaders of his generation from other states in southern India, he will play a crucial role for the BJP in the region.

Babulal Marandi

He is responsible for the strategy of the party in the tribal areas in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar

● The giant-killer from Dumka (he defeated Shibu Soren) is poised to go places as he has been selected as the 'tribal mascot' of the party. Appointed minister of state for environment and forests, Marandi has a lot to learn as this is his first term as MP. But more than 10 years of grounding with the RSS will come to his aid.

Padmanabh Acharya: north by north-east

One of the key activists of the VHP-led campaign to bring tribals into the Hindu fold, Marandi is responsible for the strategy of the party in the tribal areas in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar.

With the BJP making significant strides in tribal areas since 1991, Marandi's importance within the party is evident even in the choice of ministry given to him. Forest rights has been a touchy issue with tribal communities for years, and the BJP is seeking to send signals to the community by appointing one of 'their men' to the important portfolio.

Like many other emerging stars of the BJP, Marandi owes his growing clout to Sushil Modi at the state level and to Advani and Govindacharya at the national level.

S. Gurumurthy: tough negotiator

Ananth Kumar

He is seen as the main architect of the winning alliance with Ramakrishna Hegde's Lok Shakti in Karnataka

● Unlike other media-savvy and technology-obsessed BJP leaders, this second-time MP from Bangalore (south) has his political roots in the *sangh parivar*. He started attending *shakhas* from a young age and went on to become a prominent ABVP leader in Karnataka where the BJP was in need of young blood after the initial inroads made by the party in 1991.

His appointment as Cabinet minister caused heartburn as he has 'overtaken' other BJP leaders from Karnataka like V. Dhananjay Kumar and Anant Hegde. But, what apparently has got him the pre-eminent position is his closeness to 'Nagpur' (he was the only Cabinet minister who attended the recently-concluded national executive meet of the RSS near Bangalore). Also, Ananth Kumar is seen as the main architect of the winning alliance with Lok Shakti in the state.

With the BJP now specially targetting the south -- specifically consolidating its gains in Karnataka — Ananth Kumar's importance is poised to increase as, like several others, he has age on his side — and, of course, the tag of being an Advani loyalist.

Swaminathan Gurumurthy

This Tamilian chartered accountant is going to play a vital role in shaping the government's economic policy

● The Madras-based chartered accountant is being considered by many as the 'real' finance minister

BJP leaders with other members of the coalition: the colour saffron

given the proximity of Yashwant Sinha to the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch, the RSS front organisation that Gurumurthy has almost single-handedly built over the past five years. Even if this notion may be considered slightly exaggerated, there is no denying that this Tamilian is going to play a vital role in shaping the government's economic policy.

Gurumurthy derives his power from his skill in dealing with a wide range of people and can simultaneously manage conflicting interest groups. He has good connections within the media and has used this to the party's advantage in the past.

Gurumurthy's added advantage is his close association with Cho Ramaswamy and the duo's ability to spring many a surprise. Gurumurthy also has very close ties with Govindacharya and had been instrumental in providing him with a haven during his *vanvas* years, when Murli Manohar Joshi was the party president. A tough negotiator, Gurumurthy is looked at with awe within the BJP and though not directly connected to the party, he is a very important cog in the wheel.

Satya Narain Jatia

Keeping a low profile within the party has helped him, and he has allowed his talents along with his background to be his main calling card

● His appointment as labour minister with a Cabinet ranking has raised eyebrows — more particularly in the Birla empire as Jatia started his political career as a trade union leader in the Birla owned-Grasim unit in Nagda in Madhya Pradesh.

From the Scheduled Castes, Jatia has further done his cause good by nurturing Ujjain, his constituency, particularly well. Since 1980, he lost only during the tidal wave in favour of the Congress in 1984 and his margin has been comfortable in all elections since 1989.

A Sanskrit scholar, Jatia's stature has grown dramatically within the *sangh parivar* following the Mandalisation of the BJP. With the party sticking to its theory of social engineering, Jatia has replaced Bangaru Lakshman as the most significant Scheduled Caste face of the party.

Keeping a low profile within the party has further helped Jatia and he has allowed his talents along with his background to be his main calling card. With the BJP winning the largest number of reserved seats since 1996, Jatia will play a more important role in identifying how the BJP could cast its net wider among the SCs. Jatia is clearly a marathon-runner not given to chance his arm at sprints.

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay/New Delhi

V. RAJAGOPAL

"Swamy is not known in the country because of a post or a party or because he keeps hangers-on. Swamy is known as Swamy, because he is Swamy"

Sense and nuisance

If one wants to take up a job as a trapeze artiste in a circus, he should take lessons from Subramaniam Swamy, for he has mastered this art to perfection. Swamy is one of the few who have managed to survive thus far despite having clashed with the high and the mighty throughout their political careers. The list of his adversaries over the last 25 years reads like a who's who in Indian politics.

Take the recent Jayalalitha episode. Swamy has been steadfastly supporting the lady and doing her bidding. In fact, what the Congress and the United Front could not do, Swamy and Jayalalitha did. They almost pulled off a

coup. By refusing to send in the letter of support to the President, the Bharatiya Janata Party was almost forced to give up its claim to form the government. Finally though the lady did send in the letter.

Swamy and Jayalalitha are the best of friends? True but strange. For not long back, the former had gone all out not only to dismiss her AIADMK government but even to ensure that the lady was put behind bars on various charges.

He has never been a politician in the true sense of the term. For he has always worn his heart upon his sleeve. Ever since he joined politics, which was way back in the early Seventies, as a member of the erstwhile Jana Sangh, his entire political career has been marked by controversy and his penchant for defying convention.

Then came 1977 and the elections. Swamy's constituency was Bombay North-East. An acquaintance recalls on his novel method of campaigning. At the Chembur railway station, he would

grab hold of a passerby and implore, "*Humko vote do.*"

He won riding the anti-Emergency wave garnering more than 51 per cent of the votes. But he was deprived of a berth in the council of ministers. Does he blame anyone for that? Yes. None other than Atal Behari Vajpayee. In an interview in 1989 Swamy had said, "Atal Behari Vajpayee tried to suppress me all the time. In the Emergency, he attempted to pressurise me to surrender and I did not like all this."

This may or may not be true. However, Swamy also alleged that it was Vajpayee who wrote a letter to Indira Gandhi asking for pardon. Only after this was he granted parole.

One can't say the same about Swamy. One has to give the devil his due. Because he resisted the Emergency staunchly. As a Rajya Sabha member, he created quite a stir when he appeared in Parliament for a day and again went underground.

Of course that was more than 20 years ago. What are his equations with Vajpayee now? "It started from negative and now it is zero. I hope from now on it becomes positive," said Swamy — who

"Vajpayee tried to suppress me all the time, in the Emergency he attempted to pressurise me to surrender and I did not like all this" (*Swamy 1989*)

"What about men like Hegde? He goes about like a high priest of morality while in real life he has been misusing his office and public money for private profit" (*Swamy 1989*)

is not known to mince words — in a television interview.

Does it mean that Swamy has mellowed? Certainly not. Because on the eve of the swearing-in ceremony, he was back to his old self. "I will vote against the government in the no-confidence motion if Hegde gets the external affairs ministry," he said. Why? "Because Hegde is involved in a dubious business deal between a state undertaking and a German firm."

As far as Hegde is concerned, this is nothing new. If the question is: who is Swamy's *bete noire*? Surely, the answer will be Ramakrishna Hegde. Swamy's run-in with Hegde goes back to the early Eighties when he denounced the latter in no uncertain terms.

It all started during the merger of the Lok Dal(A) and the Janata Party. Though it was widely believed that Hegde would become the party chief, Ajit Singh was made the president by Chandra Shekhar and that too at the behest of Swamy.

In fact, Swamy blew the lid on Hegde who till then was going around sporting his clean image. "What I really dislike about Ramakrishna Hegde is this business of being Mr Clean. If you are not clean, why do you have to go around making all kinds of claims to morality and integrity?" he retorted.

Swamy didn't stop there. He continued firing one allegation after another till Hegde finally resigned from the chief ministership of Karnataka when it was disclosed that he was involved in a telephone-tapping controversy. Where Veerappa Moily and others failed, Swamy succeeded single-handedly. He was besides himself with joy to have "discovered the real Mr Hegde for the people".

Further revelations on Hegde's alleged involvement in several cases relating to an urban land scam earned Swamy grudging admiration. For the volume of paper work — ranging from Cabinet notes, letters from the CM's office and

"It can be established from documents seized from Harshad Mehta that the money was paid to Mr **Advani**...The BJP is more corrupt than the Congress" (*Swamy 1993*)

minutes of the Bangalore Development Authority's board meetings — spoke of Swamy's sheer tenacity and single-minded devotion to pulling down his opponents, no matter how high their stations in life. The lesson: never mess with Subramaniam Swamy.

This is one of the rare traits that Swamy possesses in abundance. So he says, "It is easy to level charges at anyone but I've done it with documents, with full proof, always. I work, I am not a frivolous man. So why shouldn't I get the credit for it?"

On 21 November, 1990, Swamy became a Union minister for the first time, getting commerce, law and justice under the prime ministership of Chandra Shekhar. He was reminded then of a forecast he had made in 1979. "I have a feeling of destiny. I know in ten years I will be Prime Minister."

Today, it is 1998 and Swamy says that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh does not want him in the BJP-led government, in spite of the fact that he enjoyed an excellent rapport with RSS stalwart Nanaji Deshmukh in his early years.

Maybe because the saffron think-tank is aware of Swamy's potential as a troublemaker. Possibly, because it pon-

known in the country because of a post or a party or because he keeps hangers-on. Swamy is known as Swamy because he is Swamy."

True. Swamy's political career took off like lightning. It was November 1974. He had just been elected to the Rajya Sabha on a Jana Sangh ticket. Those were the days when Indira Gandhi was waxing eloquent on corruption.

Within days Swamy challenged Mrs Gandhi on the floor of the House with a dossier on how Sonia Gandhi — still an Italian national — was working as a *benami* insurance agent for Oriental Fire and General Insurance Company. "She (Sonia) had given her address as 1 Safdarjung Road and had only insured people in the Prime Minister's office." Mrs Gandhi had no other option than asking Sonia to wind up the agency.

Swamy was ecstatic. "I was just a kid then. All these senior MPs had never got Mrs Gandhi to admit anything of this sort but I went and got it the first time I tried."

Now, Swamy starts his second innings in the rainbow coalition. Will that be as eventful as in the past? Will he continue to expose corruption, be it in

RAVI SHANKARAN

"I have evidence that **Jayalalitha** had prior information about the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi which she failed to share with the central agencies" (*Swamy 1995*)

dered over the question: will the BJP government survive with Swamy as one of its ministers?

The answer is difficult to fathom in the context of his track record. Swamy is an individual who has his own party, formulates his own ideology and is his own master. He is not the one to take orders from someone else. "I am a unique man in a unique position. Swamy is not

government or otherwise?

Subramaniam Swamy once had to contend with the allegation that he was the ruling party's Trojan horse in the Opposition. To counter this, he argued that V.P. Singh had become a national hero by exposing in-house (read the Congress) corruption. So, why shouldn't he? •

Arnab Mukerji/Calcutta

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Glitz, glamour and an evening to remember

Saturday night, 14 March — it was highland fling in Bombay. At the first Lux Zee Cine Awards, Salman Khan jigged, sang, yelped and mock-cried when buddy Shah Rukh announced that "my good friend Salman had never won an award". So his Best Actor Award for *Dil To Pagal Hai* was Salman's! Madhuri Dixit won the Best Actress Award and Karisma Kapoor, the best supporting actress, all for 'DTPH'.

Mahima Chowdhary, who debuted in *Pardes*, didn't know what to say after hers was declared the Lux Face Of The Year. But stars don't stumble for words. "I am proud to be the sole recipient and the only one for a whole year," she gasped and shut up after that.

GAUTAM RAJADHAKSHYA

Salman: isn't he funny?

Too much for one evening?

Of course, Dilip Kumar was studiously different. Reacting to the Lifetime Achievement Award, he spoke in impeccable Urdu. "I thank all the millions who have tolerated an incomplete person like me. It is not merely an honour, it is a reward for all these years of trepidation and hope."

Kamalahasan: quick-witted

Coming to the glamour girls, there were Aishwarya Rai, Juhi Chawla, Raveena Tandon and Sonali Bendre. Though it was Danish singer Whigfield who set the crowds aswinging with her hit tracks *Saturday Night*, *Think Of You* and *Sexy Eyes*.

But the quip of the evening came from Kamalahasan. "I missed International Women's Day by a few days," he said while receiving the best comic role award for his performance in *Chachi 420*. Wit, nowadays, is hard to come by.

Mahima in a still from *Pardes*: pretty face

PLAYERS AND WRITERS

They are not professional writers — one is a cricketer and the other a footballer — but it didn't stop them from writing. Both Aussie vice-captain Steve Waugh and Nigerian-born Cheema Okerie are now busy finishing their forthcoming books.

While Steve is writing a travelogue of the places the game has taken him to, Cheema's autobiography is tentatively titled *My Odyssey*. And Calcutta features prominently in both the writings. For Cheema, it's but natural.

An 18-year association with the city has made him one of the highest paid players in India. And Waugh, who's been here several times, finds it so enchanting that during his recent visit he took team-mate Gavin Robertson on a guided walking tour.

Seeing a group of children chasing their taxi on their way back to hotel, Steve exclaimed, "This is Calcutta...the city of joy."

Never mind it sounded cliched, it was genuine excitement.

SANTOSH GHOSH

Steve Waugh and Cheema: a fling with words

Madonna: from sensuality to serenity

OH DIVA!

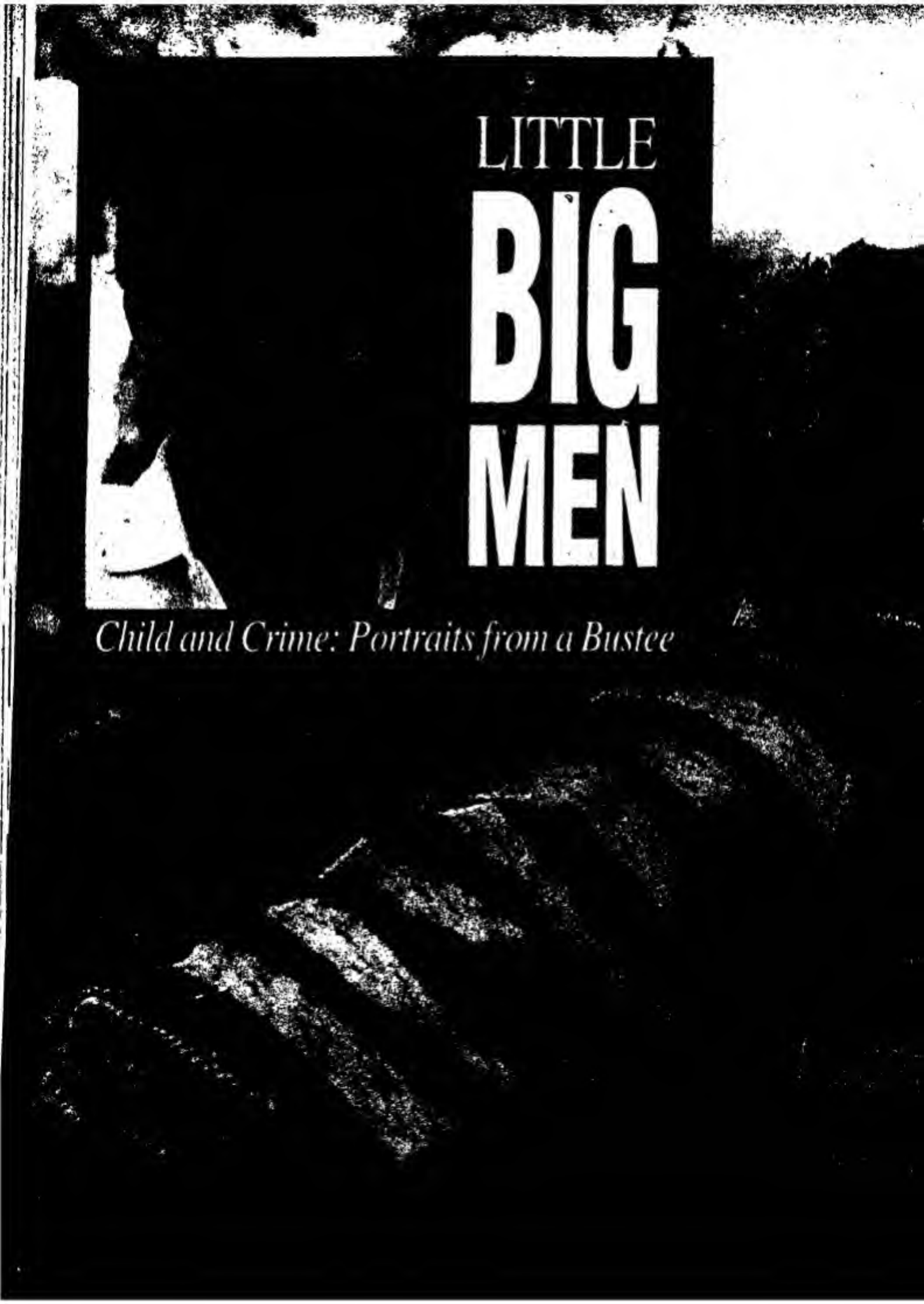
From sultry sex-icon to *karmic* awakening. Madonna, the scandalous, sensational goddess of sensuality is turning to Hinduism?

Here's what she sang in her latest album *Ray of Light*: '*I travelled round the world/ Looking for a home/ I found myself in crowded rooms/ Feeling so alone/ Had so many lovers/ Who settled for the thrill/ Of basking in my spotlight*'.

In *Shanti/ Ahstangi*, one of the tracks in Sanskrit, the Material Girl sang '*I worship the guru's lotus feet/ Awakening the happiness of the self revealed*'.

Obviously, it is a different kind of revelation she is talking about. But one critic couldn't help being cynical. "Madonna is only six years gone from sucking on feet to using them as catalysts for spiritual revelation," he sniggered.

It's in bad taste, yes, but why the sudden need for catharsis? Maybe, it's something to do with age — she is pushing 40 — and the birth of her daughter Lourdes. Or maybe, she has realised that after orgasm, it's only emptiness.


LITTLE
BIG
MEN
Child and Crime: Portraits from a Bustee

• What's your name?
Nazrul.

• How old are you?
Don't know. My father says I am seven.

• Do you smoke?
Yes. *Bidis.*

• How many?
Not certain. 20-25 maybe.

• Do you hide while smoking?
No, I smoke in front of everybody. I stub it out only if someone important I know comes along. Yes, I can't smoke when I go to my Mama's place.

• What else do you take?
Gutka, cigarette, *haaria*, wine in flat bottles. I have also tasted beer.

• Have you ever been to school?
No.

• Do you want to go to school?
Yes.

• What work do you do?
I work in a fruit-seller's shop. I also sell lottery tickets.

• What else do you do?
Steal.

• Where?
In all places — shops, people's houses, fairs.

• What if you get caught?
I am a kid, they will let me off.

• How much do you make?
20-25 rupees each day.

• How much do you give at home?
Not much. I eat outside. Spend money on gambling.

• Do you beg?
Never.

• How's your elder brother?
Don't talk about him. He takes my four-year-old brother to steal. Then, all he gives him is 50 paise.

• Do you see films?

Yes. I like those with a lot of fighting.

• What will you do when you grow up?

Marry Mana (she is a little girl living next door). Buy a car...have a nice house.

Nazrul is one of a gang of imps led by another seven-year-old, Akhtar. The little ragamuffins work for a living and steal for fun, indulging in amazing acts of derring-do that at times even shocks some of their hardened elders. They live in a small, congested bustee, not far from Midnapore railway station, where rickshaw-pullers, petty traders, day labourers and even practising thieves find shelter in pigeon-hole tenements. The slum is called Beltala. No one knows why. Perhaps there was a *bel* orchard here once upon a time.

Midnapore, crowded and lacklustre, lies 150 km to the south-west of Calcutta. It was a great town once that played a key role in India's freedom struggle. Today, the glory has faded. Its inhabitants live under the shadow of the booming commercial hub of Khargpur, with its IIT, fat-cat traders and a sprawling railway junction where super-fast trains stop and go.

It is here, a moffussil past its prime, where Nazrul and Akhtar live, roaming the streets, hungry and underfed, sniffing their way through life for money and morsel.

In their crowded little bustee of reed-and-mortar hutments, devoid of lights or lavatories, everyone works, from seven-year-olds to those past 60. Some make an honest living working as domestic help in sedate middle-class homes. Others sell fruit or cheap trinkets or work as labourers in dusty, hardware godowns. But many, like Nazrul and his little boss, find more dubious means to survive.

There's no way one can miss the children in this area — there's just too many of them, always hanging around, playing in the dust and harassing meek passersby. The municipality has built a macadam road skirting Nazrul's bustee, but motorists rarely venture this way. The darting little children would make driving difficult.

With men and women off to work early, there is no one to watch over them. So they don't go to school. Some that did, have long dropped out. And their favourite pastime? Gambling. They also steal. There are about 50 children between 10 and 15, and almost all of

THE THREE MUSKETEERS

AKHTAR

THE BOSS. He smokes cigarettes, chews tobacco and drinks *haaria* (rice beer). Though he can't tell the letters of the alphabet, he has quickly learnt the English numerals. He had to, if he wanted to sell lottery tickets. He drinks *haaria* everytime he goes to the railway station. He relishes its sour taste, and craves for more. Nazrul tells him the drink keeps you from belly-aches and makes you strong.

SADDAM

SIX-AND-A-HALF and already a versatile player. And a fine actor, too. He can spin mournful yarns for alms, and burst into a piercing wail if caught in the act of stealing. He's also mastered the art of picking pockets. Among the midgets of the underworld he enjoys quite a reputation. He is hired by professional gangs and even changes sides for a price.

NAZRUL

HIS FATHER is a rickshaw-puller. All hell breaks lose when he comes home late in the evening. Invariably drunk, he badgers his wife, an anaemic creature who washes dishes, washes clothes and sweeps the floors in babus' houses. Nazrul's father contributes nothing to the family. His mother and elder brother, now 13, keep the kitchen fire alight with Rs 20-30 a day. Nazrul contributes ten rupees; some days, five.

The place turns into a Bal-casino for the greater part of the day, with children betting on anything

them indulge in petty crimes. Between 5 and 10, there are about 20, who do it now and then.

There is no Balwadi here, and perhaps there never will be. So the place turns into a boisterous Bal-casino for the greater part of the day, with children betting on anything worth a wager. The toss of a coin brings in money. A game of marbles entails a small stake. And roadside cricket — just to reassure Manoj Prabhakar — involves heavy betting. Even the children of the babus studying in a nearby primary school are drawn to the thrills like flies. Teachers, despite all good intentions, are unable to stop this.

Gambling, one may say, runs in these people's blood. The children have acquired the habit from their fathers who drink, beat their wives and bid in the evenings, squandering their day's earnings without providing for enough food.

It's a vicious circle from which it's difficult to break free. Like the inviolable rotation of the sun, men hit the bottle in the evenings; then gamble in the hope recovering their wasted earnings; and, finally, when everything is lost, they slip out to steal.

It wasn't always like this. Though life in these parts had always been difficult, crime was never this rampant. But three outbreaks of riots — once in 1956, then in 1962 and again in 1972 — wreaked havoc on this predominantly Muslim bustee. Shattered by

three violent orgies which left deep psychological wounds, the people slipped into a quagmire from which they are yet to emerge.

Homeless, pennyless and jobless, there were only two options before these people: starve or steal. It was no wonder that gangs emerged, some specialising in petty burglary, while others acquired notoriety with their operations spanning from Kharagpur to Calcutta. There were loaded trucks on the highways; unsuspecting passengers in night trains. For the men of Beltala, they were their targets and source of sustenance. Some say there are at least 21 adult males involved in organised crime, and they had all started young.

The youngest one that is known to lift a thing or two is barely six. He's being initiated into adult ways by his still minor role models. He puffs a few *bidis* occasionally, filling his tender lungs with acrid smoke. Dark complexioned, woolly-haired, with a stubby nose and ashen face, he goes along with any group that's willing to take him. For his little role, of a scout or a watchman, he gets a small fraction of a not-so-large booty.

Saddam is six-and-a-half, but is already a more versatile player. And a fine actor, too. He can spin mournful yarns for alms, and burst into a piercing wail if caught in the act of stealing. He's also mastered the art of picking pockets. Among the midgets of the underworld he enjoys quite a reputation. He is hired by professional gangs and even changes sides for a price.

Nazrul and Akhtar like Saddam, and often work with him. There is no rivalry among them. None of them would be here, if only home was a better place.

Nazrul's father is a rickshaw-puller. All hell breaks loose when he comes home late in the evening. Invariably drunk, he badgers his wife, an anaemic creature who washes dishes and clothes and sweeps the floors in babus' houses. Nazrul's father contributes nothing to the family. His mother and elder brother, now 13, keep the kitchen fire alight with Rs 20-Rs 30 a day. Nazrul contributes ten rupees; somedays, five.

Akhtar and Nazrul have struck up a firm partnership. Akhtar is the second of three brothers. His father is a trolley-pusher in the railway yard. His elder brother, like him, sells lottery tickets and also steals.

Akhtar's grandmother had put him in school, hoping that would keep him off the

In their crowded *bustee* everyone works. Some make an honest living. Others like Nazrul find dubious means

path of vice. But the boy refused to go to school one day, complaining that the teacher had beaten him for no fault of his. His shirt — and he had only a few — had been ripped.

His father thrashed him. His mother boxed his ears. But Akhtar wouldn't back down. They stopped his food for three days. Even that didn't work. Akhtar stole a packet of biscuits on the fourth day and ate on the sly to douse his hunger. On the fifth day, he decamped with a pile of wood, and ran into an equally desperate fellow, Nazrul, the day after. Thus, at the age of seven, Akhtar slipped into a labyrinthine netherworld to emerge as the lord of the flies, leading a ragtag band in its surreptitious escapades around town.

Today, his teachers say he was a bright boy.

Akhtar quickly picked up the ways of the adults. He learnt to smoke cigarettes, chew tobacco and drink *haaria* (rice beer). Though he couldn't tell the letters of the alphabet, he soon learnt the English numerals. He had to, if he wanted to sell lottery tickets.

He drinks *haaria* every time he goes to the railway station. He relishes its sour taste, and craves for more. Nazrul tells him the drink keeps you from belly-aches and makes you strong. Then, feeling a little heady, Akhtar and his merry boys sit down in a circle for a game of cards. They don't play with the queen of hearts and the king of spades to keep policemen away. Their cards carry faces of Shah Rukh Khan, Sunil Shetty, Ajay Devgan, Madhuri Dixit and other stars of the Bollywood galaxy.

What does Akhtar and his gang steal?

"Anything we can lay our hands on — sweets, cake, iron rods, wood, clothes, shoes, money — whatever we get," he says.

• **Do you sell this to K. (name withheld)?**
"He doesn't always buy everything. We sell to babus. They also buy our stuff."

• **Aren't you afraid of stealing?**
"No."

• **Who is the gang leader?**
"I am the boss. I distribute the share."

• **How much do you make each day?**
"20-25 rupees."

• **How much do you give at home?**
"10 rupees."

• **What's the most striking event in you life so far?**
(Akhtar tries to remember.) "One day, I was caught stealing. That was the first time. But they didn't beat me. The offered me *puris* and *alu-curry*. I don't know why. Believe me, they were good people."

Akhtar looked wistfully, a shadow of innocence still lurking in his large, dark eyes. He hasn't learnt to hate the world yet; maybe, the world won't hate him either. •

Anwar Rahman/Midnapore

Says **Firoz Ali**, winner of the Classic Indian Open

"Golf is my life"

ASHOKE CHAKRABARTY

Our world, they say, is the world of dreams. Sometimes, some dreams come true. So we dream. So we be.

As the late afternoon sun bathed the verdant greens of the Royal Calcutta Golf Club (RCGC) on 15 March, the moment of truth arrived for a young man who had dared to dream of becoming a sporting hero. He is unsure of his exact age (early 30s, one should say), but he is sure of his next 'stroke'. And this time, he has struck gold: the Classic Indian Open.

Meet Firoz Ali: a classic rags-to-riches story. Ali, the perpetual underdog, emerged out of nowhere to beat a strong field (including second-placed Dean Wilson of the USA by five strokes, with 14 under-par), and pocket the country's biggest golfing purse (Rs 19,21,166, to be precise, he'll tell you, with disarming simplicity).

Having battled poverty and all its attendant odds since childhood, Firoz is understandably delighted today. And an air of excitement pervades the humble Ali home in south Calcutta, the adjoining RCGC, and the entire pada.

Firoz spoke to SUNDAY *(in a mix of Hindi-Bengali, spattered with English words) about his struggle and success — his late father (whose small shoe-dealership business went bust when Firoz was still a child); his mother (who just let him be); his wife Babita Bibi (yes, a Hindu-Muslim affair, the archetypal 'woman behind the man', caring for his golf kit, praying for him); his sons (Imran, 7, and Irfan, 2, who he hopes will become 'great golfers'); his club (the RCGC, 'the best in the world'); his golfing hero (Greg Norman); his favourite pastime (watching Kader Khan-Johnny Lever's comedy on TV); his disappointments ('only if...'); his dream of buying a new house for the family and driving into RCGC in a Maruti...*

Spend too much time with The Phenomenon and you run the risk of becoming something of a believer in these hopelessly cynical times.

Excerpts:

SUNDAY: When did you start playing golf?

Firoz Ali: I started when I was very small, class 3/4. As our house was just beside the club (RCGC), I would go there with my brothers and friends. We would watch the members play, then ask for the old balls and play on our own.

I never worked as a caddy. I just wanted to play. In fact, I would often cut wood from the trees and practise with it. I used to hit the ball long and hard, but there was no angle-*wangle* with that wood club.

Q: When did you decide to take up the sport seriously?

A: From the very beginning, I was only serious about golf, nothing else. And when I saw everyone playing tournaments, I too decided that I would play competitive golf. I played my first tournament in Lucknow, where I missed the 'cut'. As a beginner, *chot khate-khate* I suddenly started playing well from 1984. I remember I won my first substantial prize money, Rs 1,200, at a tournament in Tollygunge Club. With this money I went to play in Bombay.

Q: Did anyone come forward to help you then?
A: In the beginning, a club member, S.K. Shah, helped me a lot. He gave me shoes, gloves, golf set. He said, go play, I'll support you.

I started winning some tournaments, and losing others by a very narrow margin. In 1995, I joined the Omega Asian PGA Tour, playing the World Cup, etc. I was initially supported by the IGU. And my sponsor Pioneer Polyfab helped me out.

Everywhere I travelled alone, everything was so different and difficult. But I just kept on telling myself that I had to play good golf. I always believed that if someone wants to become something from his childhood, he will be successful.

Q: Did you really think that you would win the Indian Open?
A: I was playing in Burma just before the Calcutta Open. There, while we were travelling together, some foreign players said that 'Calcutta is your home course, you will win'. Then for the first time I thought that yes, I will win the Open.

I arrived in Calcutta just the day before the tournament and I had no time to practise. But I was totally focussed on my game and I gradually grew in confidence.

Q: How much of a 'home' advantage did you have?
A: Yes, there was an advantage. I have grown up on these greens. This is my home. And my family, friends, the club members and locals were all supporting me. After I won,

"Classic had once rejected my plea for sponsorship because I couldn't speak English. Today, I've won the Classic Open!"

more than me, they were happy. They hired a band, everyone was dancing, they lifted me on their shoulders and brought me home. It was unbelievable.

Q: A lot must have changed with this win.
A: For the first time, people are noticing me, *hamare game ko izzat de rahen hain*, reporters are coming to me, people on the roads are stopping to say 'you are the Indian champion'. I never dreamt all this would happen.

But I also feel sad that when I was struggling to play good golf, no one came to me. *Humko kabhi koi seriously nahin liya. 'Yeh to chhota player hai'*, they would say. Now I have won Indian Open and everyone is coming to me! But I won't change. I have always done everything on my own. Whatever I have become, is because of my own hard work. That's why I'll never live in lazy luxury or be arrogant.

Q: Has any Indian golfer encouraged you?
A: Very few. At the Open, only Gaurav Ghei told me, you have to win, you can win it. On the Omega Tour, Milkha Jeev Singh would always encourage me and tell me that 'nothing is going to happen in India, you must play abroad'. Lakshman Singh was also very nice. And Kapil Dev *to mera boss hai*. He always talks to me very nicely, also Jadeja.

In India, the politics is very dirty. *Indian hoke Indian ko help nahin karte*. So I have decided *ki golf khelna hai, khud ke liye aur desh ke liye naam kamana hai, aur family dekhna hai, bas*. If I rise I'll rise on my own. I'll be grateful to whoever helps me but I will not go begging for support.

Q: What kind of difficulties have you faced for being looked upon as a *'chhota'* player?
A: Our country is strange. In Japan everyone speaks Japanese, Thai in Thailand, Korean in Korea...It is only here that *Hindi ka koi izzat nahin, sirf English chalta hai*. I feel sad,*'yeh Hindustan hai ya foreign country?*

I once wrote to Classic for sponsorship. I was interviewed. They were speaking in English, I, in Hindi. They said 'he doesn't even know English' and rejected my plea. And now I have won the Clasic Open...

Q: Where do you go from here?
A: *Aur aage jana hai.* I am happy that I have become an

Ali (left) receiving the winner's cheque from ITC chairman Y.C. Deveshwar

international champion, winning on one of the most difficult golf courses. I have already got invitations to play in Japan and America. Now I know, if I get good sponsors, then I can compete with the best in Europe and America and earn a lot of glory for my country.

Golf is my life. I will play till 55-60. I will also help caddies and the players with no backing to be good golfers. I hope God gives me enough money to keep my family happy and to coach and sponsor these *chhota* players.

Q: All in Calcutta?
A: Yes. *Yahan janam hua, yahan sab kuch paya, yahan marenge*. Calcutta is Calcutta. •

Sumit Das Gupta/Calcutta

Talking about Karisma, why did she make such a point of snubbing her father, Randhir Kapoor, at a recent awards function? Called on to receive her award, Karisma made a great point of saying how she owed everything to the efforts of her mother Babita. There was no mention of a man called Randhir Kapoor. In fact, it was almost as if Babita was Karisma's only parent.

And that despite the fact that Randhir Kapoor was among those attending the function. Just one question: what was Karisma trying to prove?

Bad news for fans of Arshad Warsi (or good news, depending on your point of view). Warsi, who had temporarily patched things up with girlfriend Maria, is on his own yet again. Apparently the lovers could not sort out their differences so the reconciliation was rather short-lived. The last one heard of the couple was that Maria had cleared out from their joint home for good and moved into her own apartment.

So Warsi is a gay bachelor once again (in a manner of speaking). And is, no doubt, looking for someone to share his sorrows with.

Any takers?

So finally it is official. Abhishek Bachchan will be launched as a hero in J.P. Dutta's (of Border fame) next film. The heroine for this venture is yet to be finalised. But it is most probable that Dutta will plump for a fresh face.

Watch this space.

Yet another star daughter and star son have succumbed to the lure of the arc lights. Babita and Randhir Kapoor's youngest, Kareena, has decided to follow in *didi* Karisma's footsteps and become a Hindi film heroine. And yester-year star Rakesh Roshan has taken on the task of launching her in style opposite his son, Hrithik.

But whatever unkind critics may think or say, Karisma is not in the slightest bit insecure about her sibling joining the big bad world of films. She knows that no matter what the quality of the competition, she can more than hold her own. •

FOREIGN ELEMENTS

Former Prime Minister Inder Gujral's list of political appointees abroad underscores the need to replace them with career diplomats with impeccable credentials

Former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral may be out of any political reckoning in the 12th Lok Sabha, but he is an unlikely hero in an unexpected setting: the Syrian foreign ministry. For more than half a decade now, some 50 posts of Syrian ambassadors across the world are lying vacant just because President Hafez Al Assad is unable to make up his mind on whom to appoint where!

Senior Syrian diplomats, who are frustrated by their inability to get these ambassadorships which they see as their due, have marvelled all through the United Front (UF) government's tenure in office at Gujral's penchant for handing out jobs in the Indian diplomatic service. In a matter of months, as Syrian

South Block: the foreign office needs to be overhauled

No other government in India has handed out ambassadorships to persons who are not diplomats by profession the way the Inder Gujral government did during less than one year that it was in office

diplomats went green with envy for their Indian counterparts, Gujral changed the Indian ambassador to Syria twice.

His first choice was a fellow politician from the Janata Dal, Hari Kishore Singh, who was also Gujral's deputy in the V.P. Singh cabinet when Gujral was the minister for external affairs. Elected to Parliament from Bihar once upon a time — like Gujral when he was Prime Minister — Singh was picked up from oblivion by the UF government and sent to the most sensitive diplomatic job in the Middle-East. But Singh, who is more at home in the rough-and-tumble of Bihar politics than in the chanceries of a foreign capital, gave up the job even before he could complete the round of calls which are mandatory for an incoming ambassador in Damascus. Never mind the huge expenditure that the government has to bear every time an ambassador is installed in a mission, a successor—thistime a career diplomat — is now packing his bags to leave for Damascus.

No other government in India has handed out ambassadorships to people who are not diplomats by profession the way the Gujral government did during less than one year that it was in office. Of the ten political appointees who now head Indian missions in various parts of the world, as many as six were appointed by Gujral. The UF government inherited two non-career ambassadors who were posted by the previous Congress administration and retained a career ambassador who had been reappointed on contract after his retirement.

It also did not disturb a very special appointment by Rajiv Gandhi as far back as 1986: that of a Buddhist monk from the north-east as envoy to Mongolia. This envoy has proved to be more popular in Buddhist Mongolia than any local politician and has stayed on in his post because he is one of the more stabilising influences in Mongolia as the country makes its difficult transition from communism to economic and political pluralism.

Two more political appointments by Gujral were in the pipeline as Atal Behari Vajpayee was invited by President K.R. Narayanan to form a new government, but it is now expected that those appointments will fall by the wayside.

Such was the rush in the final days of the Gujral government to reward the then Prime Minister's friends with plum government jobs that some ambassadors appointed by the UF government are still trying to go abroad on those postings. A typical case is that of Mohammed Afzal, once a steward in Karim's restaurant opposite Delhi's Jama Masjid, then an Urdu journalist with a dubious reputation and finally a Rajya Sabha MP, thanks to his proximity with Gujral and V.P. Singh.

Afzal's immediate family members — his parents and his siblings — are all Pakistani nationals. In 1969, he went to live in Pakistan for a year with the intention of finally emigrating there. In 1970, when he returned to Delhi to prepare for the final move across the border, he struck up a questionable association with the controversial Imam Bukhari of Jama Masjid. As they say, for Afzal, there was no looking back. Naturally, he stayed on in Delhi and did very well for himself.

Despite such worrying antecedents, in January this year, more than a month after Gujral had become caretaker Prime Minister, he pushed through Afzal's appointment as India's ambassador to Yemen. The Yemenis demurred, but pressure was put on them to accept the appointment. In mid-February, as India was bang in the middle of an election, Yemen agreed to Afzal's nomination. He is still trying to leave for Sanaa.

Another example is that of Jaspal Singh, a life-long friend of Gujral's who was professor of Sikh religion and history in Delhi's Khalsa College for over two decades before being catapulted to ambassadorship in Mozambique in February this year. Like Afzal's, Singh's appointment was also made well after Gujral had become caretaker PM. But unlike Afzal, Singh rushed off to Maputo to take charge although India was by then well into the election process.

Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi: their choice was dictated by criteria of excellence

During his first term as Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru appointed a large number of ambassadors from outside the world of career diplomacy, but the compulsion for their selection was the absence of a regular or adequately trained foreign service at the time of Independence. Indeed, many of those whom Nehru thus brought into diplomacy subsequently became career diplomats.

However, Nehru's nominees for

these jobs were men and women who had distinguished themselves, people who would be looked up to and respected as India's representatives abroad. Both Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi continued the tradition of selectively bringing in people from outside the IFS as ambassadors. But their numbers were few and their choice was dictated by criteria of excellence.

The V.P. Singh government gave the short shrift to these criteria and instead opted for cronyism. The first of what was to have been the diplomatic reward for cronyism came with the appointment of Kuldip Nayar as high commissioner to the UK by Gujral, then foreign minister. Several other similar appointments were to have followed, but mercifully V.P. Singh had to bow out of office. The havoc that Nayar wreaked at the Indian High Commission in London and his complete unsuitability for the job have been brought out in Nayar's own words in *India House*, a book in which he recounts his experiences as India's man in the UK.

To his credit, Nayar honourably quit his post the moment V.P. Singh was forced out of office. But the string of political appointees whom Gujral installed in Indian missions abroad during the last one year have not thought it necessary to demit office in deference to the new dispensation in New Delhi.

The BJP-led government is said to be in favour of recalling all political appointees sent abroad by its predecessors, but beset as he is by a host of pressing challenges, this may not be a priority for the new Prime Minister

The BJP-led government is said to be in favour of recalling all political appointees sent abroad by its predecessors, but beset as he is by a host of pressing challenges, this may not be a priority for the new Prime Minister.

A perusal of the list of Gujral's political appointees abroad, however, underscores the need to take an early decision to replace them with either career diplomats or others whose credentials are impeccable. The presence of some of these appointees with dubious records in Indian missions abroad is a bad advertisement for the Vajpayee government, which claims to be different. Besides, there is evidence that their ambassadorship can damage India's interests abroad: the rot needs to be stemmed without further delay.

S.D. Muni, a professor in Jawaharlal Nehru University in the capital, who was appointed as ambassador to Laos last year, is by any yardstick the antithesis of Afzal or Jaspal Singh. But Muni was sent to Vientiane at a time when India's defence cooperation with Laos was at a very sensitive stage.

The Laotian defence establishment did not trust Muni who was seen as an outsider in the Indian government at a time when the future of his mentors in India's political leadership was uncertain. For that matter, the Indian defence establishment also withheld files and information from the political appointee of the Gujral government. As a result, a promising defence relationship with Laos is now in a shambles.

Similarly, 72-year-old L.C. Jain, a Gandhian and member of the Planning Commission during V. P. Singh's prime ministership, is probably the worst choice that Gujral could have made for the job of envoy to Pretoria. Post-apartheid South Africa is keen to put behind Gandhian sentimentality and look ahead into the 21st century. When Gujral was on a visit to South Africa last year, leaders of that country said as much to the Indians. Jain's presence now threatens what could be a vibrant relationship between India and South Africa.

Salman Haidar, Gujral's nominee for high commissionership in London, has a different problem despite his credentials as a former member of the Indian Foreign Service. If the BJP-led government is to get to the bottom of the Bofors scandal — for which the Channel Islands has now become crucial — it is important that the Indian High Commission in London has to be headed by someone who has no stake in the Bofors conundrum. Haidar has been close to the Gandhi family through generations.

It cannot but be uncomfortable both for the BJP leadership and for Haidar himself to be in London at this stage. Besides, there are unanswered questions about why a Congress-supported UF government insisted on Haidar being sent to the UK at a time when the Bofors-Channel Island link was just coming into the open. Among the appointments which may fall by the wayside is that of a new high commissioner to Ghana. H.P. Sharma, whose nomination is still in the pipeline, qualified for the job only because he was private secretary to V.P. Singh when he was commerce minister. These nominations, which have given Indian diplomacy a bad name, have also made the Indian government synonymous with distribution of patronage. Unless the new government brings down the curtain on these dubious postings, some of the dirt arising from these appointments will rub off on the Vajpayee government as well. •

Atal Behral Vajpayee: time to act

K.P. Nayar/New Delhi

Mrs G

As Sonia Gandhi settles down to reorganise the party, Congressmen jockey to grab key posts

Initially, the newspapers criticised her. After her first encounter-of-sorts with media persons outside Rashtrapati Bhavan, there were complaints that all Sonia Gandhi said was: "I don't know." But there was nothing of this diffidence in the Sonia that Congressmen met at the party headquarters the day after she took over as Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) chairperson. Here was a Sonia who *did* know. There was no hesitation in her voice, no diffidence in her manner as she met groups of Congressmen from various states.

Her first meeting was with Congressmen from Madhya Pradesh. Since this is the largest Congress-ruled state, the party's poor showing in the polls was a matter of concern. Chief minister Digvijay Singh had been summoned by the Congress president for an explanation. Also persent were other Congressmen from Madhya Pradesh such as Arjun Singh, Kamal Nath, Suresh Pachauri, Ajit Jogi and Tariq Anwar, party general secretary in-charge of MP.

Those who had also served under Indira Gandhi recalled the meeting with a sense of *deja vu*. "She conducted the meeting just like her mother-in-law would have done," said one. At first, she said nothing, but just listened. Digvijay Singh sought permission to sack some ministers from his Cabinet — especially, those in whose constituencies the Congress candidate had fared badly.

She asked everyone to give their views on the matter. As was to be expected. Arjun Singh opposed it. Those who weren't forthcoming with their views such as Pachouri were asked very specifically: But what do *you* think?

"This is exactly what Indira Gandhi would have done," recalled a Congressman. "She would first hear everyone out, pin down those who were sitting on the fence, and only in the end, give her opinion," he added.

It does look as if the Congress has got itself another 'Mrs G' back at the helm.

Initially, when Sonia took over, there were complaints that not all Congressmen would have access to the 10 Janpath citadel. But Sonia proved them wrong simply by walking across to the next door party office. Since then, she can be found in Sitaram Kesri's old office most mornings. In fact, she began her grand restructuring of the party plans with this room itself.

Party sycophants have already removed Kesri's nameplate from the door, the day he stormed out of the working committee. Later, Sonia got rid of the comfortable couch that the former president used to sprawl on while he worked at his desk.

Now the couch has been replaced with a chair — and as is the languid manner with which the party president con-

When Sonia took over, there were complaints that not all Congressmen would have access to the 10 Janpath citadel. But she proved them wrong simply by walking across to the next door party office. Since then, she can be found in Kesri's old office most mornings

AFTER SONIA

THE TWO CONGRESS CAMPS

The Arjun Singh Lobby

The Thakur smelt victory in the jaws of defeat when Sonia Gandhi took over as party chief. So what if he hadn't won a Lok Sabha seat, with his closeness to Vincent George, he was still more equal than the rest. According to his supporters in Bhopal, a Rajya Sabha nomination is his for the asking.

Within the Congress, there is no doubt that Arjun Singh has Sonia's ears: he does manage to get his message across, whether he speaks to her personally or through George is another matter.

Along with the Thakur is the old Congress (I) gang, and others such as A.K. Antony and Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy. Since Antony has no ambitions at the Centre, Singh doesn't see him as a threat. And Reddy would rather be with Singh than Sharad Pawar.

The Other Lobby

This lot comprises party vice-president Jitendra Prasada and the wannabe CPP chief who is now content with just being leader of the Lok Sabha: Sharad Pawar. The two have always had a good equation, but what makes the bond stronger is the fear of Arjun Singh. This group has the likes of Ghulam Nabi Azad, Ahmed Patel, Kamal Nath (added bonus is that with Nath you get Digvijay Singh free!) and K. Karunakaran.

Arjun Singh and Sharad Pawar

ducted the meetings. Sonia is taking her new duties very seriously.

With the No. 1 slot out for the count, Congressmen are now jockeying for the No. 2 position. Sources close to 10 Janpath have already let it be known that the party vice-president was not a constitutional post but a nominated one. So the new president has the option to nominate her own vice-president — if she wants. On the other hand, she could also appoint a working president, as also a political secretary.

With so many jobs up for grabs, Congressmen have already begun lobbying. And as usual, this has led to a realigment of the various camps within the party.

Broadly speaking, however, party workers talk of two camps within: one that is led by the down-but-not-out Thakur from Madhya Pradesh Arjun Singh. And the other, of course, by his arch-rivals: Sharad Pawar and Jitendra Prasada (*see box*). Each one is trying to outdo the other the only way they can: by proving that they have more access to 10 Janpath.

The old Kesri camp is disintegrated. Ahmed Patel and Ghulam Nabi Azad have joined forces against Arjun Singh, whereas Tariq Anwar will probably favour the Thakur and N.D. Tewari, rather than his former rival, Jitendra Prasada.

Now it remains to be seen whom Sonia would favour once she starts distributing the goodies after the party's AICC session. But from all indications, she would play one camp against the other and rule supreme.

And who can blame her. After all, isn't that the Congress culture? •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

Laloo Yadav with wife Rabri Devi: no reason for euphoria

WHAT NOW?

It's not apparent from the outside, but at heart, Laloo Prasad Yadav is a troubled man. He may be in the thick of drunken Holi revelry smearing wife Rabri with *gulal* or enjoying from a distance the odd, smutty strip-show on the premises of his wife's chief ministerial residence — a part of the rather flamboyant Holi celebrations — but a bizarre turn of events seems to have pushed the former CM into a bit of a rough. And it's not least to do with the ongoing probe into the multicrore fodder scam.

At the root of his problems is the new political *entente* at the Centre and friend and supporter Sitaram Kesri's humiliating exit from the Congress hierarchy. The two have come almost simultaneously in a double blow to the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief.

It was after his ouster from the Janata Dal — when the likes of Sharad Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan had literally shoved him out of the Dal following his charge-sheet in the fodder scam case — that Laloo had formed the RJD. Clever and astute, Laloo then saw in the Congress and its chief Sitaram Kesri an ally in the murky and slippery world of national politics.

It was but a temporary reprieve. The Lok Sabha elections were near,and old, wily Kesri realised that in Bihar, Laloo was a buffer against a BJP sweep. So an alliance with the RJD was, more than anything else, a necessity.

But that was before the polls, and before Sonia Gandhi assumed charge at Congress helms.

Things changed soon after the election results came in. While a desperate BJP groped for possible allies and a manoeuvring Jayalalitha kept the nation on tenterhooks, it was Laloo who got a

jolt when the Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee (BPCC) announced that it was 'reviewing its support to the Rabri Devi government'. And though the statement was later retracted by BPCC president Sarfaraz Ahmed, the message was clear. With Kesri gone, Sonia was an entirely different proposition.

How Laloo manoeuvres Sonia Gandhi will be interesting. For one, the relationship is bound to be strained. It was Laloo who had once remarked that Sonia should stay away from active politics. And before the parliamentary polls, in a moment of chauvinistic bravado, he even said that Sonia, being a 'nice' lady, should refrain from the race for prime ministership.

Flippant and casual, the remark was bound to irk the Congress ranks. And though Sonia Gandhi herself chose to

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ignore the comment and continued her scheduled tour across constituencies in Bihar, senior Congressmen punched back citing Rabri Devi as a glaring example of a 'naive politician'.

It was punch for a punch, but more than ruffling Congress feathers, it's the BJP-led government at the Centre that he has to be wary of now. L.K. Advani is now home minister and it's unlikely that he'll forget that it was Laloo who had stalled his *rath yatra* in 1991. And Samata Party's Nitish Kumar and George Fernandes have both worked their way into the Union Cabinet.

These are political irritants. It's the judiciary that's troubling Laloo the most with Calcutta High Court staying departmental proceedings against CBI joint-director (East) U.N. Biswas.

Laloo and his RJD had been euphoric when Biswas was charged with gross

Celebrating Holi Laloo style

It was drunken revelry at 1 Aney Marg, chief minister Rabri Devi's official residence. The occasion was Holi and the man at the centre of celebrations was her husband Laloo Prasad Yadav.

Strange isn't it, that when the world seems to be crumbling around him, Laloo should be so brazenly celebrating? But then, that's the man — irreverent, and almost reckless. Some call his style inimitable. So if it was Holi, nothing should come in the way of enjoying the day. So welcome to Holi, Laloo-style.

It's vulgar, it's bawdy and it's debauched. Where you celebrate by pouring a bucketful of diluted cowdung on an unsuspecting reveller or tearing off the clothes of those who happen to be physically less stronger. The strip-tease first. The protagonists were Patna MP Ram Kripal Yadav, the state energy minister, Shyam Rajak, and ex-MLC Anwar Ahmed (Ahmed, known for his booking skills, is also called the *katoph mantri*). The trio got into the *kapda phado abhiyan* (clothes-tearing campaign) almost immediately as Laloo signalled for the show to begin.

It started at nine in the morning and continued till around an hour after noon. High on bhaang (a type of country-made liquor), Laloo smeared Rabri with *gulal*.

The first to get a taste of what it is like was former speaker Radhanandan Jha, Laloo's next-door neighbour. Diluted cowdung was poured over him. Then Laloo intervened and poured a bucket of green colour. And to complete his misery, his clothes were ripped off. Jha simply ran away. Last year, Gupta, Laloo's 'court jester' who goes around dressed like the President, was stripped naked in full public view. Jha, at least, was lucky in that Rabri Devi who was present did not allow matters to get out of hand.

Laloo Yadav with the other revellers: decorum be damned

DANGER QUARTET

L.K. Advani: The BJP president is twice the home minister in Vajpayee's Cabinet. In 1991, it was Laloo Yadav who had stopped Advani from proceeding with his *rath yatra* and arrested him. Advani is unlikely to forget that.

Nitish Kumar: Samata Party's Bihar state unit chief is now the Union minister for railways. Ever since Laloo, Kumar has already begun baying for Laloo's blood. He is going all out to discredit the Rabri Devi government.

U.N. Biswas: The CBI joint-director was instrumental in Laloo's arrest last July. And now, with the Calcutta High Court division Bench staying all departmental action against him, the gritty and tenacious Biswas could well be Laloo's nemesis yet again.

Sonia Gandhi: Laloo had once remarked that Sonia was a 'nice' lady and should stay away from the race for prime ministership. She chose to ignore the comment but is unlikely to forget the slight. Laloo can't really hope to find a 'Kesri' in her.

misconduct for seeking the army's help to arrest Laloo last July. Charge-sheeted, Biswas had filed a writ petition in the Calcutta High Court after the Central Administrative Tribunal had dismissed his plea challenging the validity of the charge-sheet served against him. Now the division bench comprising Justice B.P. Banerjee and Justice R.K. Mitra have stayed all departmental action against Biswas.

This was bad enough, but when the going gets tough, it never rains but pours. Now it's Bihar Opposition leader, BJP's Sushil Kumar Modi who announced in the Assembly that "Governor A.R. Kidwai has been withholding the required sanction in another fodder scam case (RC 64A/96) for the last eight months. The RC 64A/96," Modi added, "has more serious charges against Laloo and once the gubernatorial nod comes, it's curtains for Laloo again."

That is, if it isn't curtains already.

It's difficult forgetting July 1997. The fodder scam had snowballed into a raging controversy. Weighed down by charges of corruption, slammed by the Opposition, Laloo, in a none-too-subtle manoeuvre hoisted wife Rabri on the chief minister's chair on 25 July. Exactly five days later on 30 July, with lakhs of supporters in tow, he stepped out of 1 Anne Marg, the official residence of the Bihar chief minister, to surrender in the special CBI court of Justice S.K. Lal. After 134 days in captivity, he was granted bail by Justice P.K. Sarin of the Patna High Court.

Once outside, wily as ever, Laloo tried to cash in on the reprieve. *"Dekho, hum nirdosh the, issi liey hum ko chhod diya gaya* (Look, I was innocent, that is why I was set free)," he kept on saying. It was Nitish Kumar who deflated him. "He [Laloo] says that he is a Law graduate," said Kumar. "Doesn't he know the difference between bail and acquittal?"

Then on 9 March came another blow. Fodder scam accused IAS officer Sajal Chakraborty, who had been on the run since July '97, was arrested from a hotel in Howrah, West Bengal. And what could be potentially damning evidences, several important files with signatures of the former chief minister and other high- ranking politicians have allegedly been recovered from his possession.

On the other hand, the Action Taken Report (ATR) of the CBI, presented before the monitoring Bench of the Patna High Court comprising Justice

S.N. Jha and Justice S.J. Mukhopadhyay literally slams the CBI probe team. According to U.N. Biswas, "The superintendents of police of the CBI at Patna, Ranchi and Dhanbad have sought transfers to their respective home cadres as they are under severe mental trauma." If nothing else, Biswas' statement effectively indicts the Rabri administration.

In order to speed up the probe, the division Bench has sought an explanation from the state government as to why it had delayed sanction to prosecute some of the accused in a particular fodder-scam case, even when the CBI had applied for sanction last August. Sources within the CBI claim that there are at least three more cases in which top politicians can once again be charge-sheeted and put behind bars. The CBI, sources claim, is waiting for the nod from the newly-constituted government at the Centre.

In May 1996, Shyam Bihari Sinha, one of the kingpins in the fodder case, was arrested within two days of Vajpayee becoming Prime Minister. It probably set the ball rolling.

Now Vajpayee has again assumed office. And though it may be a bit too early in the day to relate the two, it's clear that the BJP and its allies wouldn't be all that indulgent towards Laloo and his capers. And, more likely than not, the CBI dragnet could well close in on the beleagured former chief minister, once Governor A.R. Kidwai gives his assent to RC 64A/96. On the political front, too, the Samata Party, which has made deep inroads into Laloo's so-long unchallenged bastion, is preparing a strong-enough case to dislodge the Rabri government.

Clearly on the backfoot, the once uncrowned king of Bihar, is a worried man. And for all his brazen bluster, the sign of victory doesn't really convince. •

Naved Zahir/Patna

J.H. Patel: earning a reprieve

The enemy within

As of now, Karnataka CM J.H. Patel has nothing to fear but his own partymen

Karnataka chief minister J.H. Patel must have heaved a sigh of relief last week. Because his government, which has been tottering precariously since the results of the Lok Sabha elections were declared, faced only a minor hiccup in the form of a ruckus against the Governor's address to the joint session of the legislature. Beyond that, there were no problems expected and even the Budget sailed through rather smoothly. So for now, Patel's government is stable.

But the question remains: for how long? The general forecast is that his government will not survive till the end of its term. To begin with, his own partymen, disenchanted and disunited, are snapping at his heels. Secondly, there is the threat from Ramakrishna Hegde's Lok Shakti which has made no secret of its intention to woo away a large section of the Janata Dal MLAs and form a new, govrnment. Finally, there is a rejuvenated Congress and a jubilant Bharatiya Janata Party waiting in the wings to unseat Patel's government.

Nothing could have highlighted the widening fissures within the Dal than last week's elections to the Rajya Sabha. The party could send two members to the Upper House and a voluble fight broke out at a party meeting on the choice of candidates.

While former chief minister S.R. Bommai's candidature went through with almost no protest, it was former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda's insistence that his family friend from Holenarsipur *taluk*, a little known lawyer called Javare Gowda, be elected

which drew heated arguments.

According to some who were present at the meeting, the rest of the Dal members were against Gowda's candidate since they felt he was using the party to help his own men. "We even got to the point where we wanted to put up a rebel candidate against Gowda's but gave in in the end since we did not want our differences to harm our party's image more than it already has," said the second-rung leader.

"Obviously, despite the debacle of the Dal in the elections, Gowda hasn't learnt his lesson and he still wants to treat the party as a personal fiefdom," grumbled another leader. "These leaders, because of their personal rivalries, have become liabilities for the Dal. We are now thinking of rallying unitedly behind some other leader if only to save our skins in the next elections," he said.

Saving their skins is what is uppermost in the minds of most MLAs who have at least 18 months more to go before their terms expire. An analysis of the Lok Sabha elections shows that if an election is held right now, there might well be a hung Assembly and they are loathe to go back to the electorate before the end of their tenures.

K VENKATESH

Following its debacle, the Dal has set up a six-member committee to review the situation. B.L. Shankar, president of its state unit, says the committee has started speaking to the MLAs to collate material on the work that is needed to be taken up in their constituencies.

The exodus of Dal MLAs to the Lok Shakti will take place when Ramakrishna Hegde gives the signal. But Hegde's party will not get majority even with the BJP's 36 MLAs in a House of 224

"There is no point in not admitting that we fared badly," he says, "we have a year and a half left. We should try and manage the state better so that we will do well in the next elections."

But not all Dal leaders are as hopeful as Shankar. Many of them fear that because of the dissensions within the party and its rather poor track record in administering the state, they will not be re-elected.

While Patel is reassuring himself that insecurity among the MLAs will ensure the stability of his government, it is also undoubtedly fuelling the Lok Shakti's desire to form a government by getting a large section of the Dal MLAs to defect.

Jeevaraj Alva, Hegde's trusted lieutenant and president of the Lok Shakti state unit, has for long been saying that "Patel's government can be brought down within 24 hours". Now, Alva claims there are enough number of MLAs wanting to switch over and says, "The option of forming another government without holding fresh elections is still open. It is a matter of simple jugglery of numbers and we will strike when it suits us."

Dharam Singh: "The government will fall on its own"

The "exodus" of Dal MLAs to the Lok Shakti will take place when Hegde gives the signal and has something concrete to offer them. Says Alva, "So far, we have not done anything since there is a lot of confusion within the Lok Shakti and because there is some political ambiguity with what our ally, the BJP, wants to do."

However, though Lok Shakti claims that it can attract more than 70 of the 112 Dal MLAs, it would not be able to attain majority even with its ally, the BJP, which has only 36 MLAs in a House of 224.

Besides, the BJP claims it is not keen on forming a coalition government with defectors. State BJP president B.S. Yediyurappa has stuck to his stand that a new government can only be formed after fresh elections are held.

"Firstly, we are not standing on our toes to pull down the Patel government," says Suresh Kumar, the BJP spokesman. "Secondly, we have not held discussions with the Lok Shakti as yet on what we should do." Kumar denies that this divergence of views between the allies is because of a perceived tussle over who should be the dominant partner in the Assembly elections. "There are no such difference of opinion," he says.

But the allies realise that the voters' support might not be as strong as the one during the Lok Sabha elections. Kumar, however, feels, "We were leading in 95 Assembly segments. If elections are held now, we might be able to capitalise on the anti-Dal mood and increase the number. But for that to happen, we will have to sit and study each one of them." Such a strategy, needless to add, will provide Patel with some reprieve.

Meanwhile, the state Congress president, Dharam Singh, has told his cadres to be on their toes to face a mid-term Assembly poll. The party, which notched up a few gains, is optimistic that it will have a chance to form the next government. "We will not do anything to pull down Patel's government," says Singh, "but it will definitely fall on its own and we have to be ready."

In the given situation, Patel is left wondering which group will pose the biggest danger to his government. Even if the rival parties' hopes and in particular the Lok Shakti's claims turn out to be mere bluster, the group Patel now has to worry about most consists of his own partymen. •

Gauri Lankesh/Bangalore

Bharati Kannamma is a sign of Kodambakkam film industry's fascination with caste equations that dominate rural Tamil Nadu. The film was released during Pongal last year

Mandal and movies

Caste conflicts: the new money spinner for Tamil cinema

Tamil cinema is going Mandal. Taking a cue from politics, the new films churned out by Kodambakkam (Madras' tinsel town) are focussing on caste issues and village politics. While recent Hindi films, shot in exotic foreign locales, thrive on urban gloss and are increasingly becoming city-centric, the reverse is happening down south in Tamil cinema. The big Tamil hits of 1997 — *Bharati Kannamma*, *Suryavamsham*, *Porkalam* — and the new hit of 1998 — *Marumalarchi* — are all based on rural life, with superstition and caste factors weaved into their themes.

Bharati Kannamma is a sign of Kodambakkam's increasing fascination with caste equations that dominate rural Tamil Nadu. The film was released during Pongal last year along with big movies like Mani Ratnam's *Iruvar* and Rajiv Menon's Kajol-starrer *Minsara Kannavu* (dubbed into Hindi as *Sapnay*). Both these mega-budget, city-centric glossies bombed, while the little known *Bharati Kannamma*, directed by rank outsider Cheran, became a super hit.

Then came director Vikraman's *Suryavamsham*, in which top hero Sharat Kumar plays the dual role of father and son and glorifies the Gounder community. It has become one of the biggest hits of all time. This was followed by Cheran's *Porkalam*, another tear-jerker portraying life in a village. This, too, was an instant success. And this year, Mammootti's *Marumalarchi*, in which he plays a Padayachi village chief, has sent cash registers jingling in the box-office.

One reason why these films have become resounding successes is that their themes match the essence of today's social reality. This is particularly true of young director Cheran's film, *Bharati Kannamma*, a tragic love story. The film is set against the caste riots between Dalits and the powerful Thevars that rocked southern Tamil Nadu some time back.

Bharati is a Dalit farm hand who works as a servant from his childhood in the house of the village chief belonging to the Thevar community. The chief's daughter, Kannamma, who grew up with Bharati, takes a liking for him. But

Bharati does not reciprocate openly, fearing the wrath of the Thevars. A lovelorn Kannamma commits suicide, and the film ends with Bharati leaping into her burning pyre and being consumed by the flames.

Made on a shoe-string budget of Rs 1.25 crore, *Bharati Kannamma* ran full houses for months and grossed over Rs 8 crore. "When director Cheran narrated to me the climax of the film, I knew it would click. The film had caste relations as its background, but had other commercial ingredients like good songs, fights and powerful dialogues as well," says Henry, the film's producer.

After chief minister M. Karunanidhi saw the film at a private screening, he was so moved that he hugged its director. The film mirrors the real-life happenings in a Tamil village where the caste system is still a dominant force.

The recent riots between Dalits and Thevars in Tirunelveli and other southern districts mark a dramatic change in Tamil Nadu's caste politics. As Cho Ramaswamy, the well-known political commentator, says, "Tamil films have always mirrored the happenings in the society. The recent caste-based films show the end of Dravidian politics and the beginning of a new political equation." Gone are the days of anti-Brahmin films, popularised by the brand of politics practised by E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar down to Muthuvel Karunanidhi.

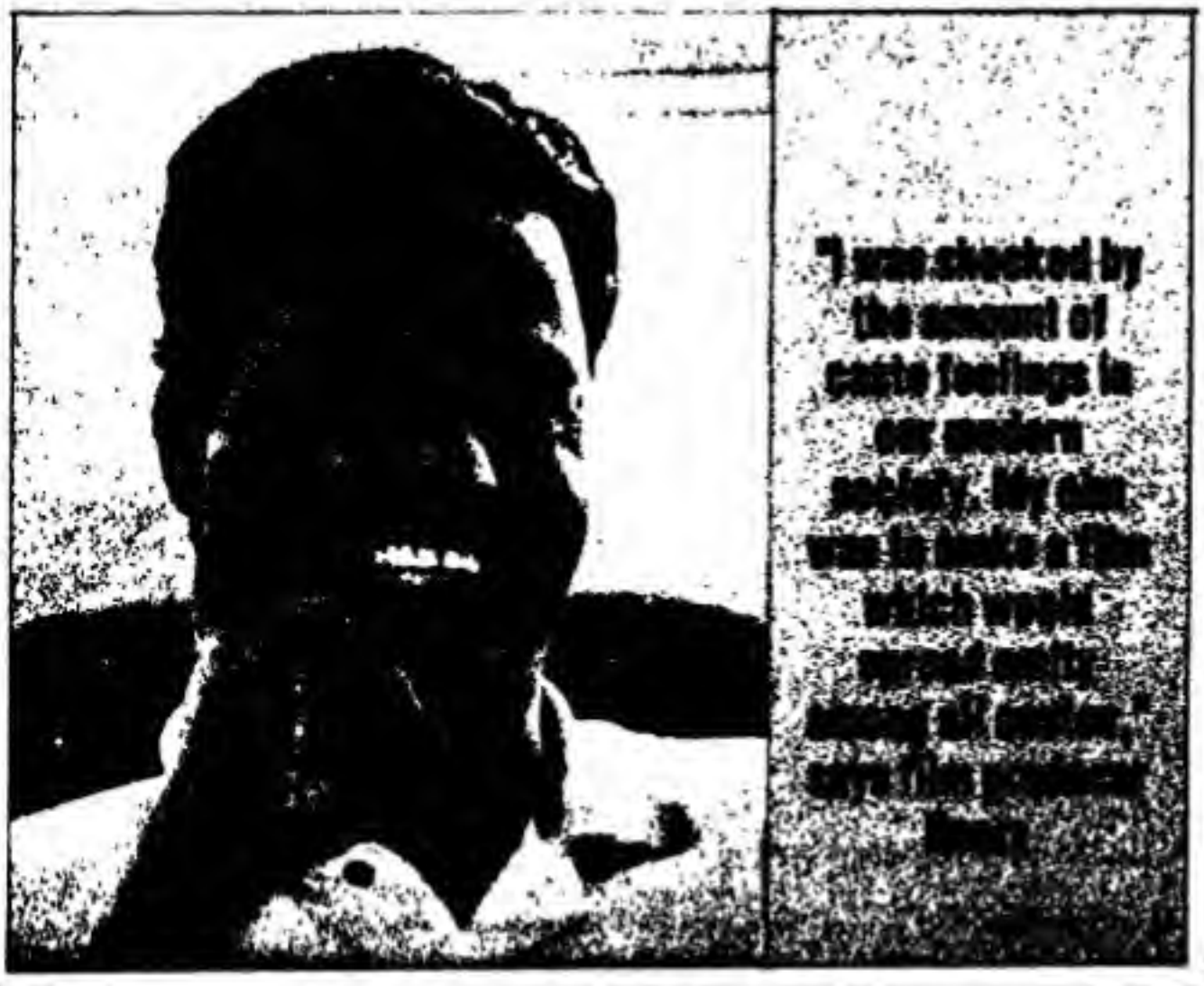
As expected, *Bharati Kannamma* ran into serious trouble with the Thevar community, who almost imposed a ban on the film. Recalls its producer Henry, "They could not stomach a film where a Thevar girl is shown falling in love with a lower caste Dalit, and insisted that certain scenes should be cut out." In fact, Henry did have to delete some scenes from prints released in the Thevar areas of southern Tamil Nadu. And in places like Rajapalayam, the film is yet to be screened. "I was shocked by the amount of caste feelings in our modern society. My aim was to make a film which would spread amity among all castes. If the Thevars wanted certain scenes to be deleted, the Dalits offered me protection," says Henry.

Cheran worked on a slightly more complex subject in his next film *Porkalam* (Good Days), bringing to light the differences prevailing even among the lower castes. And in a rather unexpected twist towards the end, the hero rejects the heroine and marries a handicapped girl. The film, shot in the interiors of Dindigul district, is a sentimental sob story set in a rural milieu but has some out-of-this-world performance by heroine Meena.

Ever since Kamala Hassan made his ode to the Thevar community *Thevar Makan*, remade in Hindi as *Virasat*, the caste factor has become key to successfully scripted films. They no longer feature wicked zamindars and coquettish village belles; country bumpkin as heroes and oppressed peasants. Instead, there is a surfeit of village-based love stories, punctuated by catchy songs picturised in lush green fields, with caste conflicts forming a tormenting backdrop.

Even some of their names — *Thevar Makan*, *Chinna Gounder*, *Periya Gounder* — are unmistakably casteist. Such films have a tremendous market in rural areas. And as the divide between the city and village audiences become prominent, themes rooted in the countryside seem to fetch a better price. "Any film of Mani Ratnam may be a hit in the towns but always flops in the villages. While any village based film which may have flopped in the towns, recover its cost in the interiors." says Thambi Durai, a leading distributor from Madurai district.

With the current cash crunch showing no signs easing, fewer Tamil films are being made, and most of them are ending up as flops. The action films have taken a beating. Top star Vijaykant's Pongal 98 release *Ulavuthurai*, with under-water action scenes shot in London, has bombed. So wary producers are



Film acter Mammootty was at first reluctant to sign up for a film with a rural story. But in the end he was persuaded to play the lead role by the producer. And the film *Marumalarchi* turned out to be a super hit

exploring rural themes for a surer path to success.

Initially, actors were hesitant to sign up for rustic roles. Mammootty, one of the finest actors in the country who plays a Padayachi chief in *Marumalarchi*, the biggest hit of the year so far, was at first reluctant to do a dhoti-clad villager. But he relented after repeated requests from producer Henry. Now, Mammootty doesn't regret the decision.

"The film is a hit because our people are addicted to their culture, and Mammootty took pains to study the local dialect and even the way the dhoti is worn by a particular community. Dasa Padayachi, the character he plays in *Marumalarchi* will definitely get him a national award," says Henry, already the producer of two major rural grossers.

Added *Film News*' Anandan, the best-known Tamil film historian: "Today's audience in Tamil Nadu is reared on a diet of satellite television, Hindi films and a flood of Hollywood blockbusters. Who will see Vijaykant's action movie *Ulavuthurai* when the real James Bond, in *Tomorrow Never Dies*, speaks in Tamil?" Indeed, the best of Hollywood action films are presently being dubbed

Film director Cheran's *Porkalam* is another tear-jerker portraying life in a village. This, too, became an instant success

in Tamil, and the local heroes are clearly unable to match the magic.

Even well-known dancer-cum-actor Prabhu Deva is fading out because Bombay extravaganzas starring Shah Rukh Khan or a Salman Khan are immensely more glitzy. Recently, children in a Madurai school voted for Shah Rukh Khan who was their most preferred hero compared to the mighty Rajnikanth!

All this has made Tamil producers fall back on the local ethos that still dominates rural life. According to M.S.S. Pandian, a fellow of the Madras Institute of Development Studies, "A certain coterie of Brahmin directors like K. Balachandar and Mani Ratnam have used caste in their films earlier for a brahminical agenda." He says Balachandar used a non-Brahmin character in *Vaname Yellai* to denounce reservations. Similarly, Mani Ratnam used a non-Brahmin character in *Roja* to uphold pan-Indian nationalism.

Even S.A. Basha, the chief of Al Umma, which is suspected to be involved in Coimbatore blasts and had made an unsuccessful bid to kill Mani Ratnam two years back, has said in a recent interview that "the film *Bombay* glorifies Hindus, especially the upper caste. Why did he have to show an upper-caste Hindu boy running away with a Muslim girl from a conservative background? The fact in Tamil Nadu is that hundreds of Muslim boys have run away with Hindu girls and later converted them to Islam."

And not just films, the industry, too, has undergone a degree of Mandalisation. Earlier, the big producers, directors and actors were invariably Brahmins or belonged to the other upper castes. Today, some of the biggest names in the industry are from the backward castes and even the Dalits. This has helped create a new crop of directors who are willing to break rigid conventions.

Meanwhile, Rajnikanth, the mega star, will play the role of a Dalit school bus driver who falls for an upper-caste teacher in *Ramkrishna*, which is about to be launched. "Filmshave to be with the times. The Dravidian politics which dictated cinema in the past is dead. The rise of caste-based parties in Tamil Nadu is being reflected in today's Tamil cinema," observes Cho Ramaswamy.

So, it's cinema that's true to life, and true to Mandal. •

Sreedhar Pillai/Madras

ASSAM

Bleak House

The Prafulla Mahanta government faces stiff opposition in the Assembly

The Budget session of the Assam Assembly, which commenced on 16 March and is scheduled to end on 19 May, promises to be a tumultuous one. Especially for chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, who finds himself in a tight corner.

The Asom Gana Parishad's (AGP) debacle in the Lok Sabha polls — in which the ruling party failed to bag even one out of the 14 parliamentary seats — has left Mahanta with a lot of explaining to do: to his own partymen and, of course, to the vocal Opposition led by a resurgent Congress.

MANZAR ALAM

STORMY SESSION: *(from left) the Speaker, Governor, and CM on their way to the Assembly*

The tone (of trouble) was set on the first day itself. Two dissident AGP MLAs, Bhrigu Kumar Phukan and Brindabon Goswami, were conspicuous by their absence. They were protesting the manner in which the Governor had refused to sanction prosecution in the letter of credit (LoC) scam against the chief minister to "protect him".

Even while the Governor, Lt-Gen. (retd) S.K. Sinha, tried to read out his opening address, members of the Congress, the United Minority Front (UMF), the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), the Bodoland Statehood Movement Council (BSMC) walked out of the Assam Assembly, in phases, voicing varied "grievances".

Trouble began from the Congress Benches. As soon as the Governor began to speak, Dr Ardhendu Dey stood up to ask the Governor why he was silent on vital issues like army atrocities, non-payment of salaries to teachers, the ULFA attacks on CPI(ML) leader Anil Baruah and minister Biraj Kumar Sarma, etc., etc., etc.

As if on cue, all Congressmen 'rose to the occasion'. Shouting down the Governor, they rushed to the well of the House and demanded that he speak on the issues raised by the Opposition. Some Congress members were armed with placards demanding a stop to army atrocities, immediate appointment of school teachers, freedom of the press, etc. Then, they all trooped out of the Assembly.

Proceedings got underway from day two, but the heat was, well and truly, on. Bharat Chandra Narah (former AGP, now Congress MLA, and husband of newly-elected Congress MP from Lakhimpur, Rani Narah) led the attack, claiming that the AGP has no moral right to remain in power. He said that the AGP's claim that the party failed to win a seat because of "ULFA offensive" cannot be accepted as in 1996, Congressmen had been attacked in various parts of the state, a minister had been killed, but the party had still not fared as badly as the AGP had, this time round. The chief minister should step down immediately, accepting full moral responsibility for the

DUBIOUS ROLE: *armymen in Assam*

ANSCOMTA

GAINING GROUND: *a pre-poll Congress campaign in Guwahati*

defeat, said Bharat Narah.

According to Narah, the AGP leadership itself stands divided over the army's role in the state. The party's executive committee and the legislature party are known to have demanded the withdrawal of the army from the state. So, the Governor should have clarified the government's stand on this important issue.

The Congress is demanding mid-term polls in Assam, as the AGP leadership has become weak and the ruling party has lost the mandate of the people. "The people have clearly rejected the party in the Lok Sabha polls. How can we allow them to continue in office?" says APCC leader Tarun Gogoi.

Participating in the debate, the chief whip of the AGP legislature party, Hitendra Goswami, said that peace is the prime requisite for the state and the government was taking all possible steps for the solution of "the problem of extremism". But CPI(M) MLA Hemen Das has said that the government should lay more emphasis on "developmental works".

As heated debates rage on in the Assembly, the battle-lines have also been drawn for the two Rajya Sabha seats to be filled from the state. Dr Arun Sarma (AGP), Drupad Borgohain (CPI) and Congress(I) nominee Santosh Mohan Dev have filed their nominations. ASDC nominee Kanaklata Dutta withdrew at the last moment. To win this triangular contest, a candidate will have to secure at least 42 first-preference votes in the 124-strong Assembly. With the ruling coalition comprising 70 legislators and the Congress 35, a tough fight is on the cards.

Meanwhile, trouble for the CM is brewing in the AGP ranks. Leading the gang of Mahanta-baiters is veteran leader Atul Bora. While Bora is playing his cards very close to the chest, source close to him say that he is marshalling his troops and biding his time. Bora could wait till the completion of the Assembly session before making his move to topple Mahanta.

In the face of stiff opposition from every quarter, chief minister Mahanta is taking his time over reshuffling the ministry and restructuring the party machinery. With the odds stacked against him, the chief minister of Assam will be banking on a dynamic state Budget, his Delhi connections, and the TINA (there is no alternative) factor to see him through, at least for the moment. •

Dilip Chandan/Guwahati

MADHYA PRADESH

Balancing act

The National Agenda promises separate statehood to Chhattisgarh and a railway zone for Mahakoshal

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government has given the people ofChhattisgarh somethingto cheer about. The coalition's National Agenda has committed itself to the formation of three new states: Uttaranchal, Vananchal and Chhattisgarh.

The issue of separate statehood was a major one in the run-up to the polls in this part of Madhya Pradesh. While campaigning for the elections in Raipur, BJP president Lal Krishna Advani had promised that as soon as the BJP came to power at the Centre, an announcement regarding the formation of a separate state of Chhattisgarh would be made. Advani had also assured the people of this region that no 'state reorganisation commission' would be required for such a move.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had been far more guarded on the issue. At some public meetings, the BJP's then prime ministerial candidate had said that if his party won all the 11 seats from Chhattisgarh, it would mean that the demand for separate statehood enjoyed mass support and so, the matter would be taken into consideration at the national level.

Of the 11 seats in the region, the BJP bagged seven — Raipur, Durg, Mahasamund, Bilaspur, Balaghat, Kanker and Bastar. And the party's performance was quite creditable in two of the remaining four seats, where BJP candidates lost by about 5,000 seats. It was only at Rajnandgaon and Janjgir that the party was beaten comprehensively.

According to sources, it took a lot of persuasion on the part of former state BJP chief Lakhiram Agrawal and present incumbent Nand Kumar Sai to make Vajpayee agree to the inclusion of Chhattisgarh in the National Agenda. They explained to the PM how the BJP had annexed the Congress bastion with its best-ever performance. They also cautioned

INSTRUMENT OF APPEASEMENT: *BJP and its allies launch the National Agenda*

him that the non-inclusion of the issue of separate statehood would cost the party dear in the Vidhan Sabha elections slated for November this year. After being told that it would help the party immensely in the forthcoming Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh, Vajpayee, reluctantly, assured the seven MPs and other party leaders fromthe region that separate statehood for Chhattisgarh would find a place in the National Agenda.

The Prime Minister has, however, refused to include the establishment of a railway zone at Bilaspur in the agenda. This thorny issue had earlier figured as a pre-poll promise in the party's manifesto and it could prove problematic for the BJP.

According to railway sources, under the existing procedures, unless a railway zone is set up at Bilaspur, a railway division cannot be established at Raipur. And a railway division at Raipur is a must for the speedy development of the entire region, the people here insist.

The BJP is having to perform a balancing act as it cannot afford to offend the people of Mahakoshal while appeasing those of Chhattisgarh. To keep both sides happy, the BJP has decided to grant separate statehood to Chhattisgarh and allot a railway zone to Jabalpur in Mahakoshal.

So, the BJP's National Agenda is being widely viewed as an instrument of appeasement. But how successful it is in addressing the burning issues of the heartland — separate statehood and railway zone for speedy development — will determine its fate in the next Assembly elections. •

Manik Madhukar Khor/Raipur

CRIME

Baywatch

Poaching and smuggling are on the rise in north Andaman and south Nicobar Islands

There was a time when the Andamans was 'the isolation chamber' of India. But that seems like a long, long time ago. Now, the archipelago marking India's remotest corner has become something of an expressway for South-East Asia.

If records with island authorities are any indication, armada of foreign boats — Thai, Indonesian, Burmese, Sri Lankan, etc. — have made the Andamans their favourite haunt. Not all of them are welcome.

Between 1996 and March '98, about 70 vessels have been impounded by the Indian Coast Guard. These vessels had entered the Indian waters for various reasons. While some were in genuine distress, many of the vessels were found to be involved in the smuggling of contraband items like arms, drugs and gold.

But the story does not end there. A large number of these vessels are now busy poaching not only in the Indian

Unconventional wisdom

'Formal education' is passe at a new 'open university' in Calcutta

Resting in pieces. That possibly sums up the state of the education system in West Bengal. Most definitely in Calcutta. The city, once hailed as the 'intellectual hub' of India, is today facing an academic impasse. Horror stories do the rounds: marksheets metamorphosing into grocery shop carry-bags, mass-scale leakages of question papers, incorrect evaluation of answer sheets, hopelessly outdated/irrelevant syllabi, endless student unions' strikes; the list goes on.

The Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU) promises to be different. Modelled on the lines of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), established in 1985, NSOU came into being by the 1997 State Act XIX (1997 being the birth centenary of the revolutionary leader), thanks to the initiatives of its steering committee members, notably chief minister Jyoti Basu, state education (higher secondary) minister Satya Sadhan Chakraborty, and the Netaji Institute for Asian Studies on whose premises the university is housed.

This will be a departure from the 'formal education' [illegible] that is practised by other universities, says NSOU registrar Shyamapada Nandy. "We will be more flexible, more unconventional. Our system will be based on 'self-learning'. The onus will be on the student to make the best use of study material packages that we'll provide."

NSOU will initially offer B.A. and B.Com. courses. The B.Sc. course is on the anvil; the delay is caused by the

SELF-LEARNING: *the NSOU premises*

ON THE WATERFRONT: *foreign trawlers intercepted by the coast guard, Port Blair*

ARRESTS '98

- 12 Myanmarese, 9.1.98.
- 9 Myanmarese, 16.1.98.
- 5 Myanmarese, 26.1.98.
- 6 Sri Lankans, 20.2.98.
- 6 Thais, 21.2.98.
- 4 Myanmarese, 21.2.98.
- 6 Thais, 3.3.98.
- 15 Myanmarese, 3.3.98.
- 19 Thais, 11.3.98.
- 12 Thais, 12.3.98.

waters, but also on Indian islands. In 1996 alone, 23 vessels were apprehended in north Andaman and in the southern part of Nicobar Islands. In 1997, the tally rose to 41. Most of the poachers belong to Myanmar, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Till the late Eighties, poaching and smuggling were not as rampant as they are now. Between 1996 and March '98, 480 foreign poachers have been nabbed by the coast guard and handed over to the Andaman Police for legal action.

So, what lures these foreign poachers into Indian territory? The depleting marine resources along the coastal line of Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka — caused by unplanned fishing and poaching — are forcing these mercenaries to venture out of their area and explore the Indian waters in search of 'livelihood'. The political turmoil and the economic slump in this region have also contributed to this influx.

"In our country, it is very difficult to survive. Employment generation has come to a stop due to political disturbance. That's why, we opt for poaching. This enables us to make money in a very short period," says Tang Hoc, a Myanmarese undertrial, in Port Blair District Jail for the last two years.

The rise in crime in the Andamans has become a serious cause for concern as poaching and smuggling are now two sides of the same coin. The poachers, who are familiar with the waters, are used by the smugglers for gun-running, etc.

Last month, the Indian Army, navy, air force and coast guard, in Operation Leech, rounded up 74 foreign nationals carrying a huge amount of arms and ammunition, headed for Arakanese rebels. They had even tried to set up a base on Landfall Island, from where they were arrested.

All this has put the coast guard in a spot. "It is simply impossible to keep a close watch on all the vessels passing through the vast Indian sea coast," confesses Vivek Tirka, deputy commandant, coast guard. To overcome this problem, the Indian Navy has now joined hands with the coast guard. Recently, at least three operations have been carried out jointly by the navy and coast guard. Operation Amphex, Sahara Ex 97 and Operation Chakra, which led to the arrest of several poachers and the seizure of a large quantity of smuggled goods.

With the Andaman and Nicobar Islands becoming the happy hunting grounds of foreign poachers and smugglers, the Indian sea force will have to pull out all stops to keep the sea wolves at bay. •

Soumen Datta/Port Blair

BIHAR

To catch a snake

A look at this deadly, dying art

As a child, he would accompany his ageing father on business calls. By the time he was nine, he had perfected the family trait. Today, at 35, he continues his daily dalliance with death — all for the sustenance of his undernourished family of four.

Meet Suresh Nat, the snake man. Defying all scientific logic, courting disaster, Suresh makes a living out of luring venomous snakes with the help of mantras. Yes, mantras which the vipers almost always respond to!

Today, Suresh is the most skilled practitioner of the riskiest and rarest of crafts. He is one of the last remaining Nats who continue to catch snakes for their livelihood in Sharifpur-Jethiyar, a *mauza* of Shakrawan village under Asthawan police station of Nalanda district, in north Bihar.

A fief of Muslim landowners, Sharifpur-Jethiyar is accessible by a pot-holed dirt-track off Saaro, a village 4 kms north, while travelling from Biharsharif, the district headquarters of Nalanda. In the Seventies, Mahavir Nat, a resident of nearby Sugiya village, came over to Shakrawan, following persecution by the Bhumihars. Recounts Shakuri, son of Mahavir, "The benevolent local landlord (Mohammad Abduz Zahir) gave us land to live on and the material to build a house in neighbouring Rajabigha."

That's how the Nats — for whom *"saanp nikalna"* was a way of life — settled there. Shakuri, now a wizened old man, has passed on the tricks of the trade to his nephew, Suresh, who lives in Sharifpur-Jethiyar and is The Saviour of this snake-infested area.

SUNDAY caught up with Suresh and some 'live' action at Shakrawan. In one of the many dilapidated *havelis* of the village, a huge cobra had been sighted. An S.O.S. had been sent to Suresh to come and "take it away".

And now, Suresh is at it, stick in hand. He begins by whistling for about two minutes. Then he pauses, smells the end of the stick and announces: *"Gohman hai. Chaal par nikla hua hai, bahut pareshan karega* (It's a cobra. It's on the move, it'll give a lot of trouble)." Then, securing the *gamcha* on his head, Suresh starts chanting the mantras: *"Aao ti ti ti ti, Aao beta ti ti ti; Aao beta marenge pitenge, To Guru ko laath marenge; Iss sivana pakrenge, Uss sivana pakrenge..."*

It goes on and on. After ten minutes, Suresh becomes insistent: *"Aao, aao, aao, aao...."* Suddenly, with a deadly hiss, a huge, five-foot-plus golden-coloured cobra lands with a thud on Suresh's stick.

"This is the one I had seen last evening," shouts an excited Mahendra Ram. But it's not yet time to celebrate. "Stay away now. It might spit venom. It is very angry," warns Suresh. The cobra makes its move. In a flash, it lands on the ground and attemps to flee. Suresh moves swiftly and takes the snake by the tail. *"Ab kahan beta? Shaant ho jaao"*, he cajoles the cobra, who seems to listen to him and gives up the fight. "Get me a pitcher," orders Suresh. An earthen pot is brought and the captured cobra confined in it.

So, what will he do with his prize catch of the day? *"Karna kya hai? Bauhar khet mein jaa kar chhor denge* (What is there to do? I'll take it to the fields and set it free)," says Suresh.

He goes on to explain that no snake-catcher kills snakes because "the mantra loses its impact and one has to perform the puja again to regain the power". Once, when his father Kanhai had accidentally killed a snake, he had to perform the

Miracle cure: Suresh cures a painful cavity

Miracle Cures

How mantras neutralise snake poison and treat cavities

The snake men have some other tricks up their sleeve, too. They have magic mantras to cure snake bites!

In this area, whenever someone is bitten by a poisonous snake they call a Nat, not a doctor. *"Jab tak sui lagega, tab tak to gohman ka kaata mar jayega* (By the time the victim of a cobra bite is administered an injection, he will die)," observes Suresh. Uncle Shakuri nods in agreement.

The chanting of mantras goes on through the night. And going by what the locals have to say, more often than not, they do the trick. These life-saving mantras, unlike the snake-catching ones, are not exclusive to the Nats. "If anyone wants to learn the mantra to neutralise snake poison or even scorpion sting poison, we teach them," reveals Shakuri Nat.

If that isn't enough, Suresh also doubles up as a dent[illegible] to cure painful cavities. The procedure, of course, is quite bizarre in [illegible]. Its simplicity, Suresh takes a neem twig and asks the patient to open his mouth wide. The twig is inserted and [illegible] the affected tooth.

[illegible] begins. *"Aao mere Sai Guru mar...de [illegible] Jalal ki mohar se [illegible]..."* And [illegible] the patient starts groaning. And out [illegible] yellowish gunk, moving towards the [illegible] the patient continues till all the gunk [illegible] twig and the patient is cured of the pain.

THE SNAKE MAN: *Suresh with a cobra*

rituals all over again.

The puja to attain *'siddhi'* (perfection) of the mantra is performed during Durga Puja. Explains Suresh, who is a Shiva *bhakt* and a staunch believer of Allah, even as he recites the name of Sat Guru of Kamrup Kamakhya in all his mantras,: "One has to go alone to a burial ground in the dead of the night. There, various mirages appear, sometimes huge pythons, sometimes scorpions...Then, sacrifices of goats, chickens and pigeons are made. Country liquor is offered to 'Masaan Baba'. The country liquor is poured onto a banana leaf to the accompaniment of mantras. The names of Durga, Kali, Masaan Baba and Sat Guru are chanted loudly, begging them to accept the offerings and to bestow their blessings. Then, a brand new set of clothes is left behind for the 'guru'."

Is this an exclusive preserve of the Nats? "Everyone thinks that those who move around with snakes (read snake-charmers) know this mantra. But that is not the case," says Suresh. "We are bound by promise that the mantra should pass only to the next generation. We cannot teach it to an outsider."

But now, it's becoming increasingly difficult to make the two ends meet. "I just get about ten kilos of uncooked rice whenever I catch a snake from any house in any village," laments Suresh. It is impossible to live properly, to send the children to school. Police persecution makes things worse. And the threat of a snake bite remains, always. In October '97, Suresh's brother-in-law Jai Ram, died after a baby cobra bit him.

So, Nats, all over Bihar, are being forced to forsake their calling. But in these changing times, the people of Shakrawan continue to live under the shadow of the cobra's hood. And as long as the Sureshs — inheritors of a dying, deadly art — are around to talk the snakes into submission, they have no fear.

"Catching snakes is my life, my livelihood. It's all that I know," says Suresh. "And now, my 12-year-old son Chotka has also learnt the language of the snakes..." •

Naved Zahir/Shakrawan (Nalanda)

Viewers' choice

The run flow at Eden Gardens, Vajpayee's swearing in, the art of stripping: it was terrific television

At the end of the second day's play in Calcutta, Navjyot Singh Sidhu told an ESPN reporter: I am a man of limitations. You could tell that didn't bother him a whit, because he'd just finished getting 3,000 runs with yet another fine performance. Smiling widely, he said: I am really enjoying all of it.

Speaking of enjoyment, this will be one day which will go down in the record books as The Golden One, when India appeared invincible. There were no dubious umpiring decisions, no dropped catches to aid the Indians: only a lovely, chanceless flow of runs. First Sidhu and V.V.S. Laxman, and then Sachin Tendulkar and Rahul Dravid made the 30,000-strong crowd in Eden Gardens roar time and again, as they hit the Aussies all over the ground.

Bogey-man Shane Warne, who's been in the news for his dietary predilictions (only home-grown baked beans for the man) could be seen shaking his head in increasing frustration, as Sachin used him for target practice. It was a

MASTER BLASTER: *Sachin Tendulkar*

truly magnificent knock, and it was terrific television.

The proceedings in Calcutta nearly put in the shade that other consistent scene-stealer, Atal Behari Vajpayee, as he took over the office of Prime Minister for the second time in as many years. As he strode towards the President to be sworn in, there was, about him, a measured calm: his Cabinet, on the other hand, displayed various degrees of glee. The ear-splitting grin on Madan Lal Khurana's face was a case in point.

After sports and politics, a little on film. On BBC's *Film Night*, the lead actor of *The Full Monty*, who has been dubbed the Sharon Stone of Britain, spoke about the experience of baring his bum to entertain 300 loudly appreciative ladies. The smash British hit is about a bunch of out-of-work steel-workers who take to stripping as an alternative profession. Now that his inhibitions have vanished, he is on the lookout for artistic reasons for taking

The great survivor

For Kalyan Singh, the end once again justifies the means

'Pride comes before a fall', goes the saying. But perhaps Kalyan Singh had never heard of it. Or else he would not have continued to revel too long in the glory of the political coup he staged on his adversaries — the Congress and the Bahujan Samaj Party — in October to romp home with majority support in the 425-member Uttar Pradesh Assembly.

The Bharatiya Janata Party strongman did manage to win the first round and even succeeded in silencing the critics in his own party. But because of the active support of the state party chief Raj Nath Singh (a Thakur) and Assembly Speaker Kesri Nath Tripathi (a Brahmin), Kalyan could tide over the odds, posed essentially by a Brahmin lobby that could barely tolerate a backward's elevation to the prized post.

But Kalyan's smack of arrogance, inaccessibility and ham-handed approach failed to endear him to many of his colleagues. "Had it not been for the self-imposed discipline in our party, some of us would have revolted long before Jagdambika Pal and company did," said a Brahmin BJP leader even while Kalyan was staging a *dharna* in Lucknow against the dismissal of his government by Governor Romesh Bhandari.

Asked another BJP veteran, "How will Kalyan ever be in a position to fulfil his oft-repeated proclamation of providing a clean and efficient government?"

The unabashed inclusion of each of the 22 Congress defectors, besides 3 from the Janata Dal and 12 from the BSP in the Cabinet, at least ten of whom had dubious pasts, was described as "part of the strategy to beat BJP's opponents on their own track".

Some political analysts also justified this, saying, "Morals and ethics come ino play where there is a common code adhered to by all and sundry; in the present context, however, morality and ethics have been taken over by pragmatic politics." As senior journalist P.C. Tandon pointed out, "When Kalyan Singh set out with the objective of ensuring survival of a BJP government, that otherwi-

DHEERAJ DHAWAN

"This is a victory of the Indian Constitution; a triumph of democracy...I had always maintained we would go further up from our previous strength and we have done it," declared Kalyan Singh

se appeared a distant dream, he chose to adopt the no-holds-barred approach and to that extent he served his purpose."

Sources close to Singh pointed out, "Our party got a beating in Parliament simply because we were warned that the BJP's image would get tarnished if we mustered up our majority to save the Vajpayee government. The BJP became the object of political ridicule for its failure to extend its lease beyond 13 days."

A similar argument had been put forward by the top BJP leadership for striking an alliance with the BSP seven months earlier in the face of opposition by the Kalyan Singh lobby. Now, it was Singh's turn to use the same argument in his defence.

But Kalyan's confidence that by providing ministerial berths to each of the defectors he had pre-empted their return to their original fold belied him. His newfound friends fell prey to machinations of political hawks.

Realisation dawned on Kalyan only when the rug was pulled from under his feet and the 22-member Loktantrik Congress Party, that had barely sworn allegiance to Singh four months ago, was up in arms against him.

As the LCP was not involved in the Lok Sabha elections, its leaders had ample time to respond to feelers from the Congress and Samajwadi Party. They were assured that if they were to desert the BJP, they would be rewarded with ready support. Mayawati, too, was consulted. Once the deal was struck, the LCP revolted.

Defending Kalyan, Raj Nath Singh said, "We did get to know about what was happening behind the scenes, but every time we confronted the LCP men, we were assured in no uncertain terms of their sincerity." Confessed Kalyan, "We took them for their word and that was our mistake."

BJP insiders maintain that resentment, both within the party and among the allies, had been brewing for quite some time. The reason was the concentration of handsome protfolios in a few hands, with the others in charge of departments that meant little beyond a chauffeur-driven car with a red light, office and paraphernalia. Many had to do with the same old flats allotted to them as MLAs since it was not possible to provide each of the 93 ministers a house of his choice.

Though Kalyan alone could not be blamed for the unequal distribution of portfolios, yet even some of his own partymen spread the word that he did not want to let the new ministers enjoy any power.

Singh's inaccessibility allowed the gorge between him and his ministers to widen. "We cannot even meet him," "He treats us like babus," "Even if you have some work, you are expected to talk to his secretaries," were the common refrains of not only the allies, but even of some of the BJP ministers.

One of the BJP ministers was heard telling another on the day of his government's dismissal, "Even if he (Kalyan) now agrees to abdicate, I am sure many of the deserters will return."

Kalyan's protagonists, however, said, "A lobby had been built up against Kalyan simply because he was not willing to oblige anyone with undue favours or extend any kind of assistance beyond a point."

According to them, "Singh had become a major hurdle in the money-spinning business of some of the ministers, so they had been planning intrigues against him." He referred to the landmark court verdict that re-installed Kalyan and gave him an opportunity to prove his majority. The trial of strength procedure, too, was unprecedented in constitutional history, thanks to the guidelines laid down by the Supreme Court.

DHEERAJ DHAWAN

"I don't regard it as a victory. It is a farce because it has been brought about through the use of moneybags, dirty tricks and horse trading," said Jagdambika Pal

It was another matter though that the Assembly proceedings on the day of reckoning (26 February) were preceded by another drama.

"Quote your price," was the catchphrase as both sides prepared for a showdown. On offer were ministerial berths, chairmanship of public undertakings, besides party tickets at the next elections. Allegations and counter-allegations of exchange of moneybags were abound.

The master strategists of the parties which had propped up Jagdambika Pal arrived in Lucknow to reassure him. These included the master of the game, Mulayam Singh Yadav, and his man Friday Amar Singh, Jitendra Prasada of the Congress and of course, Mayawati.

In the opposite camp, the activity was even more hectic and the job rather difficult. After all it was no mean task to keep

"Why must I resign?"

UP Governor **Romesh Bhandari** justifies his actions

DHEERAJ DHAWAN

Romesh Bhandari: "How can I even think of defying the President?"

Some people remain incorrigible. And Uttar Pradesh Governor Romesh Bhandari is one. So much so, that he was described in one of the recent editorials as a 'constitutional history sheeter'. Perhaps, just as controversies to his credit [illegible], so is his art of survival. No matter what he does, he always finds a saviour.

The Congress and the Samajwadi Party, which had criticised him for not dismissing the Kalyan Singh-led government after the BSP broke away from the coalition in October, are lobbying for him today, when he has earned the wrath of President K.R. Narayanan.

The President is understood to be sore with him because he dismissed the Kalyan Singh government in a partisan manner without allowing a trial of strength in the Assembly and hastily swearing in Jagdambika Pal as CM.

But nothing seems to bother the 68-year-old Governor. He defends his controversial actions in an interview. Excerpts:

SUNDAY: Why is it that you are always at the core of a controversy?
Romesh Bhandari: How am I to blame if some people believe in dragging me into controversies created by their imagination?

Q: So you find nothing wrong with whatever you did recently?
A: Whatever I did was strictly in keeping with the provisions of the Constitution. There was no way other than dismissing a government which had clearly fallen short of the desired support. And then, every party other than the BJP and its ally, the Samata Party, had categorically written to me that they were with Jagdambika Pal. So I had to swear him in.

Q: You simply took Jagdambika Pal and Co. at their word?
A: Well, they furnished a list of 221 members together with letters from leaders of each of the supporting parties. And Kalyan Singh did not even care to present his list of supporters; instead, he made vague claims and baseless allegations about the list submitted by his opponents as being false. But there was nothing to substantiate his arguments.

Q: But doesn't the haste with which you got Jagdambika Pal installed arouse suspicion about your impartiality? After all, heavens would not have fallen if you had waited for a day or two.
A: Tell me, what would I have done if I had not sworn in Pal and his new government? It was a crucial hour, with polling due the very next day. The state could not have remained without a government or under a government that would be there only for namesake.

I would have had to face charges of letting a government that had lost its majority to continue in office and indulge in misuse of government machinery in the election. Then, all these BJP rivals were camping in Raj Bhavan threatening not to leave until I dismissed the Kalyan Singh ministry and install the new government.

Q: Perhaps you also preferred to indulge the BJP's rivals in Sambhal, where your friend Mulayam Singh Yadav is contesting.
A: If anything went wrong in Sambhal, why did they not go to the Election Commission? When the commission took note of complaints about Baghpat where repolling was ordered in a number of booths, the same would have been done in Sambhal in case there was any truth in the allegations.

Q: Do you deny that you have an affinity with Mulayam Singh Yadav?
A: Well, I have affinity with so many people, and mind you, today when some people are trying to corner me, my actions are being defended not only by Mulayam, but also by the Congress, BSP as well as the Left parties. Now that's a canard being spread by the BJP in their typical RSS style of repeating a lie until it is believed as the gospel truth. May I ask them to prove what is it so special

that I have done for Mulayam?

Q: Yet, can you deny that you have prejudices against the BJP?
A: Rather, they have their biases against me.

K.R. Narayanan: professional rivalry or presidential prerogative?

Q: Loktantrik Congress Party leader Naresh Agarwal has accused you of playing the pivotal role in the conspiracy against Kalyan Singh.
A: That is an absolutely wild and baseless charge in fact. I am told that he has even gone to the extent of alleging that I offered him a crore of rupees (*laughs*)! If I had that kind of money, I'd rather keep it than part with it.

Q: There is much talk about your defying the President's directive in dismissing the Kalyan Singh government.
A: How can I even think of defying the President?

Q: Does it mean that the President never conveyed his views to you in that regard?
A: Well, I would not like to drag the highest office of the President in this messy controversy.

Q: Some of your supporters have charged the President with playing partisan against you. And many tend to believe that it was due to some professional rivalry between the two of you as you made it to the foreign secretary's post while he could not.
A: That is utter nonsense. It's true that we both belonged to the Indian Foreign Service. He was my senior colleague. It's true that I became the foreign secretary while he retired as India's ambassador to China. But let me tell you, we have always been the best of friends and there is no question of his holding any prejudice against me.

Q: Neither the High Court nor the Supreme Court has upheld your action; both preferred a test on the floor of the House.
A: I welcome the Supreme Court verdict. My main objective was to see that no side gets undue advantage by virtue of being in office. Now the court has allowed equal opportunity to the two claimants.

This is a decision that no Governor could have taken. In fact, it is an innovative and salutary decision which would strengthen our democratic processes and which would now deal with unique situations as have prevailed in UP.

Q: Have you been asked to step down or would you resign?
A: Certainly not. And tell me, why must I resign?

together a vulnerable flock that was capable of taking any number of political somersaults within a span of hours.

Perhaps that is why Raj Nath Singh used his Thakur connections to lodge most LCP members and Janata Dal defectors in the plush Shivgarh Resort owned by Rakesh Pratap Singh, who was recently accommodated in the state Legislative Council.

Speaker Tripathi had on the previous night itself expressed apprehensions about the possibility of violence during the special session, when the vote of confidence was to be taken by signed ballots. He also reminded that during Kalyan's earlier confidence vote, it was Congress leader Pramod Tiwari who had taken the lead in the violence that rocked the House.

But surprisingly, the proceedings that commenced on a stormy note with Tiwari, Mayawati and SP's Dhani Ram Verma (the leader of the Opposition) protesting about "the Speaker's partisan role" turned calm and smooth as the day went by.

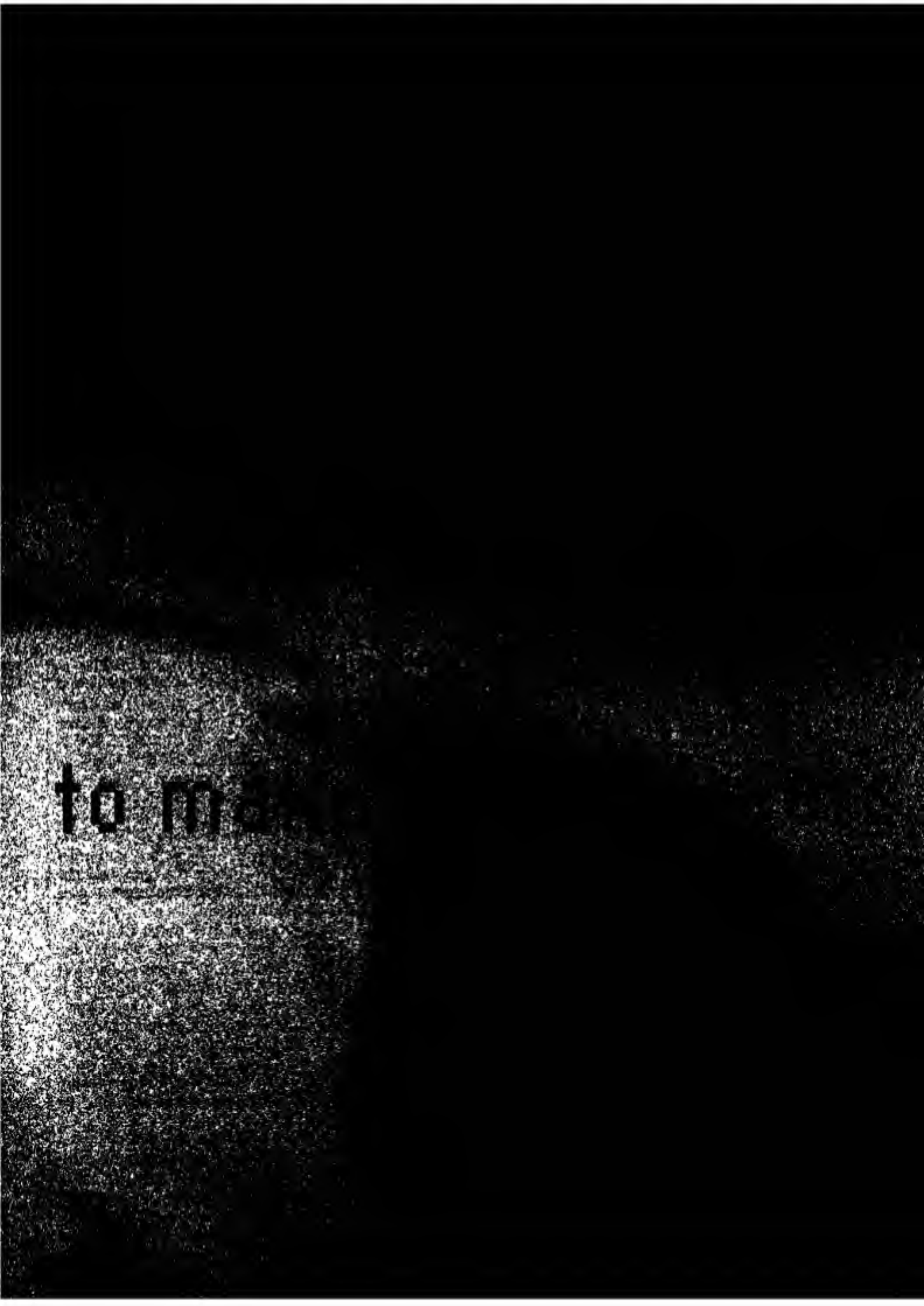
Knowing the UP legislators too well, the Speaker had got the ballot box chained. The hall was made free of microphones to avoid their misuse as missiles, as witnessed in 1997 and 1995. Entry was restricted strictly to members, personnel on duty and the media. Mobile phones, pagers, briefcases and even file covers (which, experience shows, could be used as missiles) were not allowed.

Perhaps what prevented the rival groups from getting into the act was the sword of Damocles hanging over them in the form of the Supreme Court order saying, "Violence in any form would be taken serious note of," and the full gaze of the video cameras.

A jubilant Kalyan Singh told mediapersons immediately after winning the vote of confidence, "This is a victory of the Indian Constitution; a triumph of democracy." He added, "I had always maintained we would go further up from our previous strength and we have done it." In October, when Singh faced a trial of strength, he had put up a support tally of 222. This time, it was 225 with 196 votes against.

"I don't regard it as a victory. It is a farce because it has been brought about through the use of moneybags, dirty tricks and horse-trading," said Jagdambika Pal, reacting to the result. He said he would put up his case before the Supreme Court. •

Sharat Pradhan/Lucknow



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At 83, the master painter returns to his first love—filmmaking

Husain NOW

ASHOKE CHAKRAVARTY

He doesn't wear shoes. So the first thing you look at are his feet — spotlessly clean, nails neatly clipped, the sole, pink. He walks the length and breadth of the sprawling gallery and then stops to pose for the photographer in front of a jumbo cycle he's drawn on the wall. He is dangling what looks like a small walking-stick in his hand (he's into painting Charlie Chaplin these days), but on closer inspection it turns out to be an oversized paint brush. Dressed in a vermillion red T-shirt and talking nineteen to the dozen, it's difficult to believe he's pushing 83.

Meet M.F. Husain, the best-selling and most widely-marketed brand name in the Indian art world. Lionised by the media, drooled over by art connoisseurs, trashed by critics and fellow artists, denigrated by Hindu fundamentalists — Husain seems to enjoy it all. The furore at the Sahmat show in Delhi (where VHP activists were up in arms against a work showing Hanuman carrying a nude Sita) is just a day old, but Husain is very nonchalant. Even as fellow artists plan to launch a signature campaign against this act of philistinism, Husain shakes his mop of white hair. It does not matter.

Controversies do not worry him. His detractors claim he consciously engineers them. Artist Satish Gujral accused him of playing to the galleries and suc-

Husain in the Headlines

Often, for very absurd reasons

'88

• Husain was nominated to the Rajya Sabha where he rarely spoke. At the end of six years, he came back with a bagful of cartoons of our political players.

'91

• At Vadhera's, Bombay, Husain painted three Hindu goddesses which were ritually destroyed. He repeated the feat in 1993, at Tata Centre, Calcutta. In a live performance, he painted six canvases and then whitewashed each of them.

'92

• For the Shwetambari exhibition, 30 kgs of old newspapers and a huge white cloth was bundled up and laid out on the floor. Visitors to the gallery wondered if the show was over.

'93

• Husain cut up a painting into 400 pieces and sent a piece each with an invitation to Delhi's glitterati. At a function, he would reassemble the painting and sell it for Rs 10 lakh.

'95

• Husain found his muse in matinee idol Madhuri Dixit. There was a stampede at the exhibition where he appeared with the star. Despite the overwhelming demand, Husain sold only prints and the entire collection was taken abroad to be auctioned. Husain painted a hapless, live horse before the show opened.

'96

• Hindu fundamentalists dug out Husain's nude Saraswati, painted way back in 1976, and decried him for hurting religious sentiments. Bajrang Dal activists vandalised his paintings in Ahmedabad.

'98

• VHP activists protested Husain's depiction of Hanuman carrying a nude Sita. Painter Jatin Das got beaten up when he tried to defend the artist. The show has been suspended.

"Thirty years were spent in allowing Madhuri to arrive"

Husain celebrates her arrival in his forthcoming film: Gaja Gamini

PRADIP SAHA

There is abundant use of metaphors from the epics, which are constantly balanced with contemporary perspectives. For instance: Sanskrit poet Kalidas riding on a bicycle to the coffee house; Italian Renaissance painter Leonardo da Vinci chasing Signora Madhuri so that he can paint her 'ignicious' smile

A 20-year-old Husain had hopped onto a Bombay-bound train from Indore, way back in 1936, with his paints, brushes and a dream to make it big in the film city.

Even while he painted cinema hoardings — giant faces of Durga Khote and Jamuna Barua, standing on scaffolds with a brush in his mouth and cans of colour dangling from his toes, young Husain copiously read up every available bit of literature on films.

"I am a student of the cinema whose ultimate ambition was to make a film," smiles Husain. "It took me 60 years to realise this dream, of which 30 were spent in allowing Madhuri to arrive."

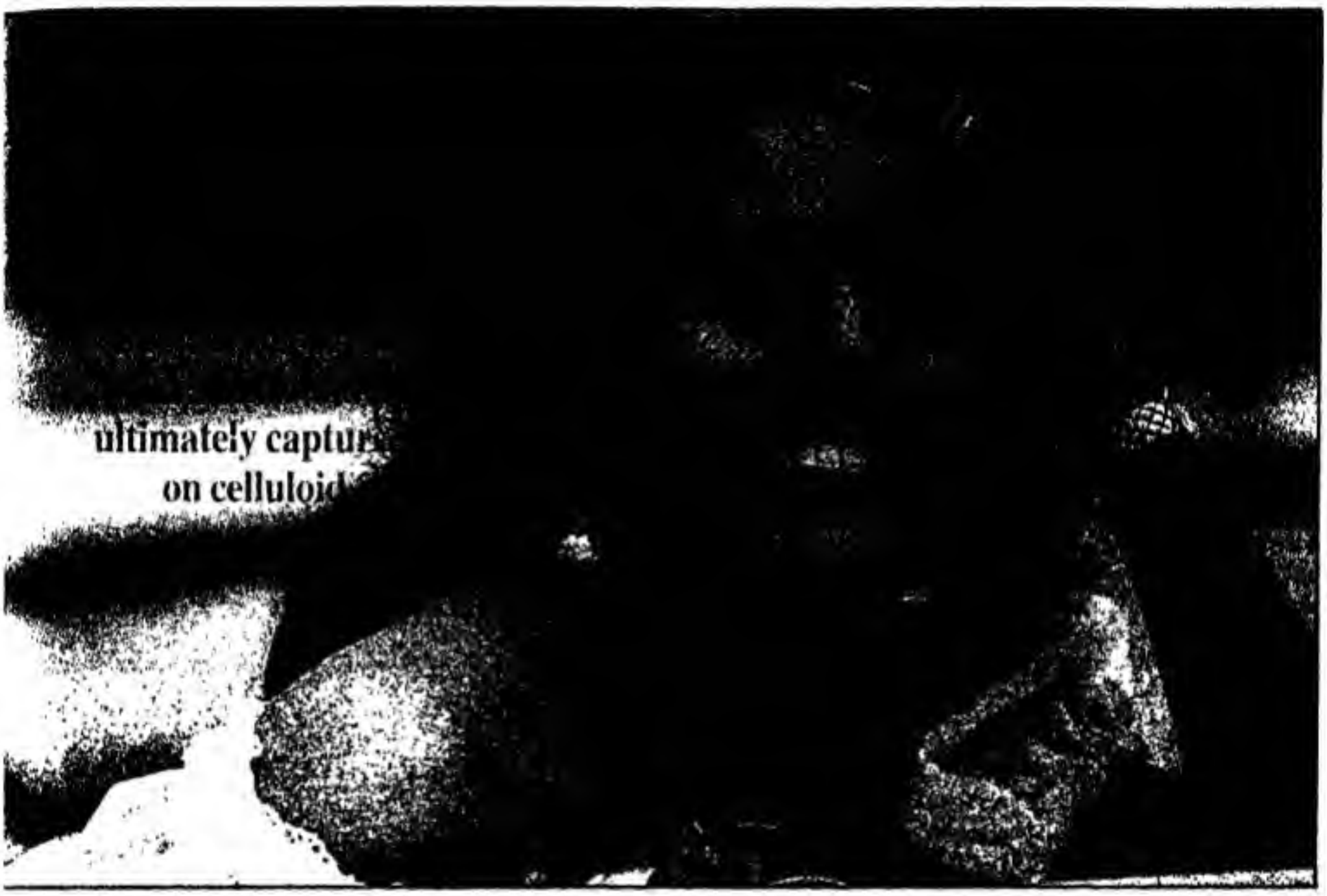
Husain has made about 14 short films so far, of which *Cow, Umbrella, Plus A Lantern, Minus A Shoe* won the Golden Bear at Berlin in 1967. But *Gaja Gamini*, his first feature film, does not have a precedent in the history of Indian cinema. He has just released the script, a 100-feet-long visual one, in the form of a book. Textured pages of images, paintings etched on silk sheets, photographs laid out to read like a shot sequence, a cassette tucked inside — surprises after surprises as one flips through the pages.

The story is, loosely, about the changing role of the Woman, in her journey through five thousand years of Indian history. There is abundant use of metaphors from the epics, which are constantly balanced with contemporary perspectives. For instance: Sanskrit poet Kalidas riding on a bicycle to the coffee house; Italian Renaissance painter Leonardo da Vinci chasing Signora Madhuri so that he can paint her 'ignicious' smile.

Entirely scripted by Husain (who also writes the lyrics), the film has been set to tune by Bhupen Hazarika and Zakir Hussain. The camera is being handled by Ashok Mehta. It stars Shabana Azmi and Naseeruddin Shah apart from Madhuri, who, naturally, plays the lead. Husain does not himself appear in the film, "but then, Da Vinci, is almost my alter ego".

Naseeruddin Shah

Shabana Azmi



cumbing to commercial interests. Hindu fundamentalists duly chastised him for depicting goddesses in the nude and flirting irresponsibly with religious sentiments. He has been pulled up by art critics for resorting to cheap gimmicks like whitewashing his own paintings or cutting a picture into pieces only to put it together again.

To all that, Husain has just one reply: "Every person is entitled to an opinion. I acknowledge and respect that opinion." What he leaves unsaid is that he too is entitled to his own views. Then why did he apologise to the public who were outraged with his sketch of Saraswati in the nude, in 1996, when prominent figures from the world of art, literature and culture were rallying behind him? "That was not because I love art any the less, but because I love humanity more," smiles Husain. "That was the only political statement I ever made."

Born Maqbool Fida Husain in 1915, in Pandharpur, Maharashtra, he moved with his family to Indore when still very young. His father was a timekeeper in a textile mill in Indore, who wanted his son to become a tailor when he grew up, for the kid liked drawing. How the young Husain arrived in Bombay with dreams of making it big, enrolled in the J.J. School of Arts, began his career by painting cinema hoardings and later went on to form the Progressive Artists' Group with his contemporaries — Ara, Gaitonde, Abbasy and Tyeb Mehta — have become the stuff of legend.

"For the first 30 years I was unknown," says Husain. "But the moment I began to be appreciated, there was no looking back." A lot of that appreciation came from people abroad. Italian film director Roberto Rossellini (Husain had helped his gorgeous Indian wife Sonali to elope with him and the duo became his lifelong friends) and British critic John Berger were among them. Between 1956 and 1961, Husain profusely painted musicians, dancers, horses, bathers, nudes and lovers.

He began painting gods and goddesses from the Hindu pantheon, placing them against the perspective of his own time, lending a contemporary canvas to the old tales of terror and betrayal. He painted scenes inspired by the Hindu epics and tales from the Bible. Then, for 20 years, he was occupied with Mother Teresa. It was actually a personal quest for his own mother, who he did not know, having lost her at the age of one.

And then, Husain found Madhuri.

When the Maharaja of painters meets the Queen of Bollywood, it's a marriage made on the canvas, preserved in a book and ultimately captured on celluloid. "The moment I saw her body language I felt she had the essence of womanhood embedded in her," says Husain, rearranging himself in the high-backed chair.

The painter and the showgirl have come together to open a joint production company, Madhuri McBull Creation. Together, they are producing Husain's first feature film, *Gaja Gamini*, which, no doubt, is an attempt to apotheosise the actress, and Husain, with her.

"As an artist, my concern is to communicate to the maximum number of people," explains Husain. "And Madhuri is the right medium in a country where millions of people go to the movies." And then he goes gush, gush about Madhuri's middle-class antecedents and rise to fame and how she is the embodiment of Shakti.

Husain's much-a-do about Madhuri brings an obvious parallel to mind. Andy Warhol's obsession with screen

His father was a timekeeper in a textile mill in Indore, who wanted his son to become a tailor when he grew up, for the kid liked drawing

ASHOKE MAZUMDAR

legend Marilyn Monroe, whose face he put just everywhere, including stained glass windows.

To people who see a dirty old man leching after a young and nubile movie star in Husain's Madhuri-mania, Husain has this to say: "Madhuri is my passion...my inspiration. She is the driving force behind my creativity."

Prior to the film, there was a much-hyped release of its '100-feet long visual script', to whip up interest in the film. And then there are plans of opening Cinema Ghar, a film museum in Hyderabad, under the aegis of MMC, where talented young filmmakers would be given opportunities to learn and work.

"My bank balance is zero. I have provided for my family. Today, all my wealth is for the public," says Husain. He is referring to the museum in Hyderabad, the Gumfa (cave museum) in Ahmedabad, and other centres of art run on his money in Delhi and Bombay. "Give me one example of an artist who has given away all his wealth for the people," he asks.

"When you are creating, you don't think of appreciation," says Husain. "The moment you start doing that, there's a risk of your art turning mediocre."

He loves to talk about his own creative process, his total involvement in his work. "I work like a man possessed. I am so impatient and restless. Even when I am not actually painting, my mind is continually working."

For an artist who claims to be totally immersed in his work, Husain has been billed as a publicity-hungry painter, whose every little movement is blown up by the media. "Oh I love the media," says Husain, quite frankly. "Whenever I do something new, I have a childish desire to share it with people." It is understandable that he and the media share a symbiotic relationship, thriving on each other.

But what happens when this same media puts him on the dock for resorting to gimmicks and cheap stunts? What happens when he is chastised for "willing to sell his talent to the highest bidder" in the art market (given that it was Husain who created it in the first place)?

Husain has no qualms about turning into a brand name that sells. "Even to turn into a brand name, you have to work hard," he points out. He is also probably the first artist who began the trend of tie-up and co-branding in this country. Live painting on stage to the accompaniment of Bhimsen Joshi's music, lending his name to a range of paints from Shalimar, and, now, of course, the Madhuri Mac-Bull glamour industry, — Husain could feel the pulse of the changing times before anyone else did.

But does he really think wads of old newspaper strewn over the floor or whitewashed paintings qualify as art? "Well, I don't fight shy of doing anything, when it gives me joy," he says, evading the question. "Besides, I couldn't have fooled people for the past 50-60 years. Anyone who sees my work closely today, will know that I have spent years working on it."

Today, he stands like a colossus, poised between the worlds of art and filmmaking. Arguably, he's the uncrowned king of the first, out to conquer the second. His paintings are greying, but his forthcoming film will see a riot of colours, as befits a celebration.

"As in painting, so in life, the difference of style and technique...different colours and different opinions...that is what make life worth living," he says. Perhaps that explains his recent batch of 'grey' paintings.

Black and White — and shades of Grey

Colour gives way to dark images

Mozart's *Unfinished Requiem* is wafting out of the gallery. Inside, compositions, huge and small, are overlooking the viewer from behind glass panels. Paintings spilling beyond the canvas, onto the glass, over yards of white cloth, across the ceiling and over the floor. Big, fresh blots of paint on the ground: shaken loose from a giant brush. It's as if a giant wound is gaping open — only the colour of the blood is black.

The exhibits in Husain Now, the artist's latest solo show at CIMA gallery, Calcutta, are entirely in black and white. And shades of grey. The exuberance of colour and bold strokes have given way to blurs, spots and blobs. For these are pictures of anger, of disillusionment with the erosion of values, of dejection at seeing the cultural, social and moral corruption the world over.

But the idea is to "turn nightmares into a vision", after celebrated Mexican writer Octavio Paz, whose lines Husain has liberally scrawled all over the walls of the gallery. Paz is his guru, in this venture. The only way one can overcome the chaotic world order, says the artist quoting the poet, is through artistic endeavour and creative enterprise.

This series, mostly done in water colour and acrylic, is more abstract than realistic. It takes a long hard look to recognise Mother Teresa — painted with just a few strokes on wet paper, allowing the pigment to go its own way.

Will this change in style make him difficult to understand, reduce his popular appeal? Husain does not seem to be worried about that. The feedback he's received in Calcutta has been stupendous. Especially from the young generation. "They are so alive," he says.

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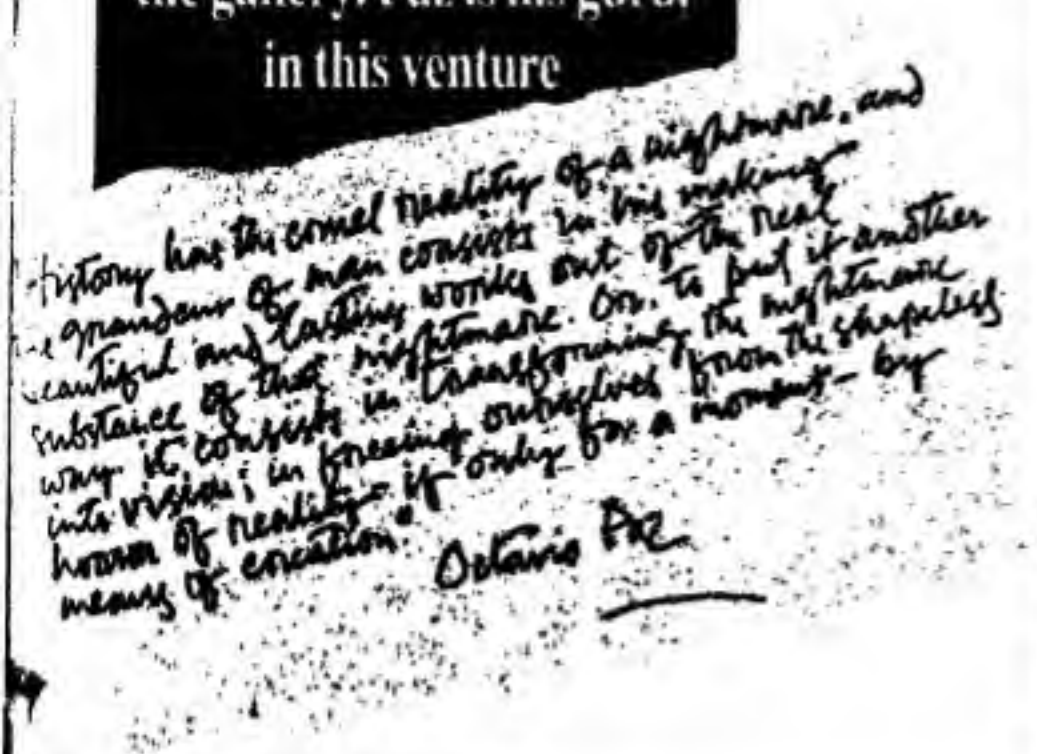


His disillusionment with the snapping of ties and thinning of the social, cultural and moral fabric, the world over in the past 70 years, finds expression in these paintings. It pains him to see the onslaught of Western culture which does not quite gel with the Indian reality. He's terribly upset with the country's educational set-up, which alienates us from ourselves.

"But thank God, it's limited to the city. In the villages, they'll have a block of stone tinged with orange vermillion and call it Hanuman," he says, pointing out to a specimen of abstarct art, rooted in Indian tradition. "That's what I call the real India. The one that is still alive."

And what about the real Husain then? What does the super-achiever like doing most, when he is not painting?

"In my hometown, every morning, I walk down (barefoot, of course) to the roadside *dhaba*, to have a cup of tea. And although I would still love to give my autograph to a hundred people, sometimes I like doing the disappearing act to create a bit of space for myself."

Then he smiles, like a child, almost as if to say, "Catch me if you can." •

Chitraleicha Basu/Calcutta

ONE UP, LITTLE MAN?

[redacted] Star wars, literally. Sachin Tendulkar vs Shane Warne. So far, it's been restricted to words only.

Warne: "I am coming off my best season in Australia...and looking forward to the 'battle' with Tendulkar."
Tendulkar: "The world knows how great a bowler he is. But I have to make as many runs as I can against the Australians as a whole and not Warne alone."

M HAMID

Tendulkar and Warne: 'feud' of the tour

Reciprocal, yes, but there's another level to it. Warne was obviously irked when somebody at the airport told him that he was a non-starter in the subcontinent. Check your facts, he told the guy. "After 18 months hard grind some niggles are going to be there. I'll try and adjust fast."

Till date, he hasn't. 16-1-111-0 against Bombay is far from flattering. And Sachin (204 not out), say those who were there, was merciless.

OUR RIVERINE HERO

[redacted] He sang, he danced, he aped...but he didn't set the Ganga on fire. But there's enough fire in him, says Chunkey Pandey. And there's still the Padma, the Jhelum, the Teesta...

So, tall, wiry Chunkey, who's been scouring Bombay for work, has now hit pay dirt in Bangladesh. His first Bengali film, *Shami Keno Ashami* was a super hit, and the second one, *Meyerao Manush*, is running to a full house.

Chunkey, of course, is modest and self-deprecating. If he's not happening in India, he says, "I can still make it in Bangladesh. If that fails, there's still Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, the Maldives...I could become the superstar of the Saarc countries."

So many choices! Life *is* hard.

Chunkey: nothing like success

CAUSE AND ACTING

[redacted] Another inhabitant of filmland. Pooja Bhatt — who first gained and then lost a lot of weight and now...is *just* right? — is on to something new. She's going to act in a Hindi play directed by Satyadev Dubey.

The Bhatt babe trying out something that's earthy and homespun? Bhatt says she's ready for something that's meaningful. She raised huge sums of money for charity by doing *Tamanna*. Now she wants

ROLE MODEL

So what if she had kissed Prince Charles? That was wild, lissom youth when anything's permissible. And it was more a peck than a kiss.

Now, Padmini Kolhapure is in dead earnest. She will be opening an acting institute in New Delhi's Hauz Khas Village.

Surprised? Don't be stuffy. Here's her logic: "Facing the camera isn't everybody's cup of tea. And producers now look for trained artistes," she said. "Our aim will be to provide that."

The details: it'll be a three-month-long training course in acting, grooming and modelling. There will also be a separate course on film dancing. A planned syllabus will introduce students to the basics of acting and instil the confidence required to face the camera. (That's what she said, right?)

Kolhapure has dedicated the school to Raj Kapoor. "As everyone knows, I am what I am because of him," she said. "It is natural for me to dedicate the school to him." Now, that's humility.

It also speaks of something else: she can place things in perspective.

Kolhapure: In right earnest

to revive defunct Hindi theatre in Bombay by acting in plays. That's confidence.

Bhatt: something that's meaningful

SLOW MOTION

Must be something to do with Oriental temperament. The Centre had decided to honour Satyajit Ray with the Bharat Ratna. That was before he died on 2 May, 1992.

Five-and-half-years pass, nothing happens.

February 1998. The joint-secretary of the Union home department calls up Ray's widow, Mrs Bijoya Ray, and tells her that the Centre would confer the award on Satyajit Ray at a function in Rashtrapati Bhavan on 1 March.

This is what she had to say: "I am upset. After remaining silent for so many years, they have suddenly taken the decision and want us to go to Delhi. At this age, I can't make it to Delhi at such short notice." Understandable, it's disrespect to a man's memory.

Of course, she did agree to accept the award finally, but not before someone from the ministry called on son Sandip with a letter of apology from the joint-secretary, inviting them to be there at the award ceremony. Sloppy, anyway.

The late maestro with wife Bijoya

COLD COMFORT

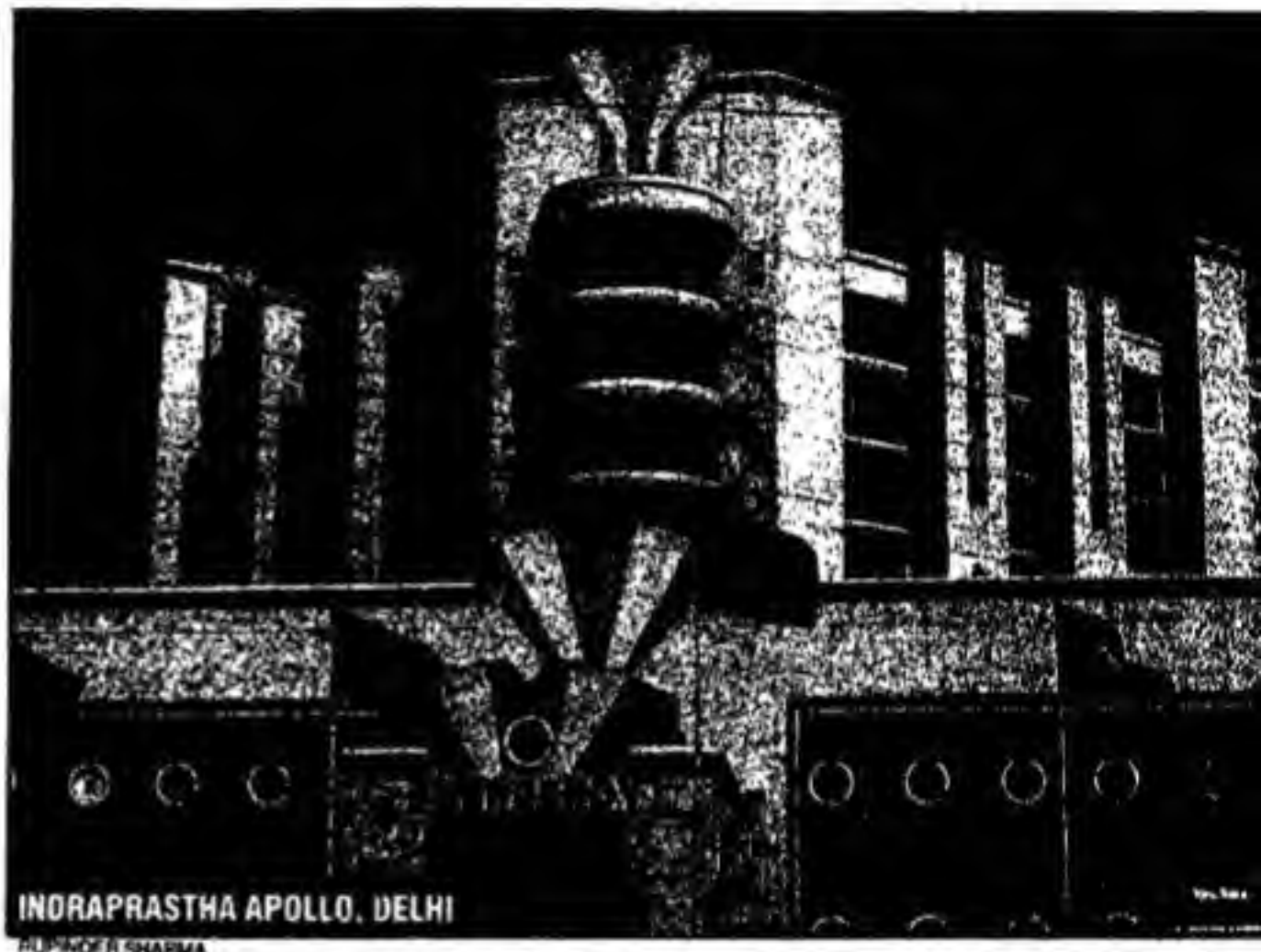
Plush, upmarket and fitted with the latest gizmos — but do the country's five-star hospitals really care for their patients?

If you travel at a short notice, and often find the best hotels chock-a-block with people, consider checking into a five-star hospital. You might just be surprised.

Consider Delhi's Indraprastha Apollo, for instance. Plushly furnished deluxe suites with state-of-the-art bathrooms, verandah and kitchenette, all the latest lifestyle gadgets and remote-control buttons, exotic cuisine (including souffle without sugar and korma without ghee) — the sheer luxury they offer could put the Hilton to shame.

But often, that is where it stops. Architectural finesse and technological acquisitions in these hospitals seem to be no surety for medical attention. In separate cases recently filed against two of Delhi's biggest and best-known hospitals — Indraprastha Apollo and Batra Hospital — the extreme commercialisation and callousness of large hospitals has been brought into focus yet again.

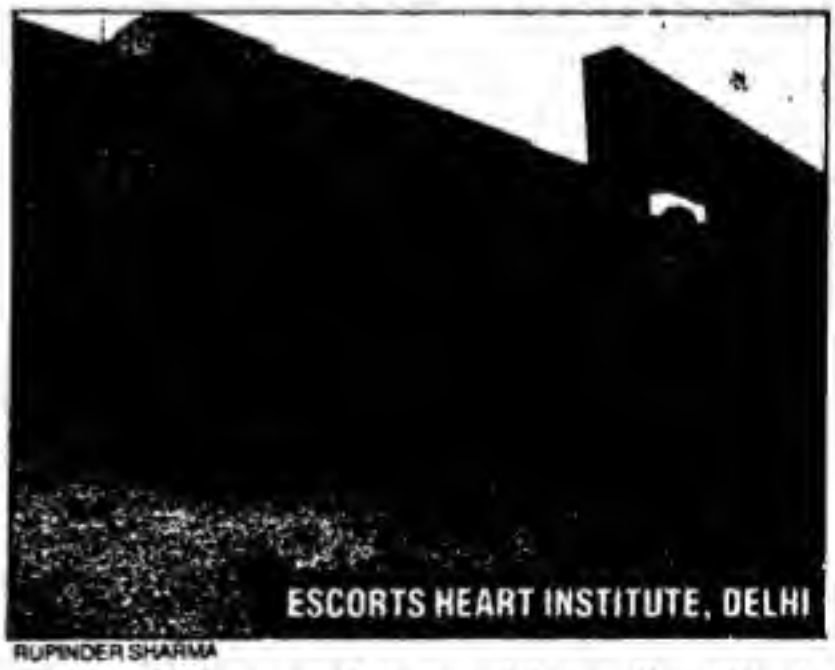
At the time of going to press, a metropolitan magistrate had ordered the filing of an FIR against Batra Hospital



INDRAPRASTHA APOLLO, DELHI

RUPINDER SHARMA

Architectural finesse and technological acquisitions in the 'five-star' hospitals seem to be no surety for care. Machines seem to have replaced medical advice



ESCORTS HEART INSTITUTE, DELHI

RUPINDER SHARMA

GOING RATES AT SOME FIVE-STAR HOSPITALS

	I. Appollo Delhi	Escorts Delhi	Hindujas Bombay	Lilavati Bombay
Room rents (Rs)	700-10,500	1,100-3,000	450-4,000	950-4,500
Surgical				
Cardiac (Rs lakhs)	5-2	5-2.2*	1-2*	0.5-1.5*
Cataract (Rs)	15,000-25,000	–	9,000-20,000*	25,000-45,000*
Kidney transplant (Rs lakhs)	1.5 onwards	–	0.4-1.25*	0.5-1.5*
Corporate health check-up (Rs)	1,750-5,000	1,850-2,100	–	–

*Costs of valves etc. at actuals *Only initial deposits

Graphic: Niranjan Maity

by one of its ward boys, Ram Singh. Singh's sister Manju had been admitted to Batra on a free OPD card (under which the hospital is bound to provide free medical care). After four operations, Manju died. Ram Singh has complained that the hospital authorities refused to release his sister's dead body to him until he paid up Rs 1,61,47 for her treatment.

Last year, the All India Lawyer's Union had filed a similar petition against Indraprastha Apollo. Its counsel Ashok Aggarwal charged that despite an undertaking to the Delhi government, the hospital was not providing any free

services whatsoever. Apollo stands on land given by the Delhi government virtually free — on the promise that it would provide free medical, diagnostic and other facilities for not less than 40 per cent of its outdoor patients.

As an additional point of interest: The Delhi government is the biggest shareholder of the hospital.

That most five-star hospitals don't provide free services despite heavy government subsidies, is only one issue. Those who believe paying five-star prices will get them commensurate medical care often come back with the greatest disillusionment.

As Shailendra Gulati of Shalimar Bagh, Delhi discovered over a harrowing period spent shuttling between some of the best-known five-star hospitals of the city.

When his mother fell unconscious in August last year, he took her to the nearest nursing home. Post a CT scan, the doctor advised him to rush her to a bigger hospital. "At Gangaram (one of the biggest private hospitals in Delhi), my mother waited endlessly in an ambulance outside. Despite my pleas that she be taken in while I stood in que to make the necessary advance payments. The consultant neurosurgeon, Dr S.K. Sogani, first told me that my mother was sitting on a time bomb that could explode any moment. Then, after we checked in, he casually informed me that the angiography (a crucial diagnostic test) would take five days because a weekend was coming and the following Monday was a holiday."

In desperation, Shailendra moved his mother to Jaipur Golden — another five-star hospital in west Delhi. There, the angiography was done on Monday. But even after a giant aneurysm (condition in which an artery becomes unnaturally swollen and large) was confirmed, the operation was scheduled for Friday — five days later. When a family friend (who happened to be a doctor) expressed worry over the delay, the consultant doctor handling the case, Dr Sushil Bhasin, retorted jocularly, *"Aap to samajh sakte hai. Itna to karna padta hai. Aur phir aap teen din Gangaram me bhi to kaat kar aaye hai* (You, being a doctor can understand well enough. One has to do all this. And then, haven't you spent three days in Gangaram for the same thing?)."

Horrified at the doctor's shameless admission, the family moved her to Apollo. There "they wanted an advance of a lakh, but settled for Rs 50,000 because we were accompanied by a consultant doctor of the hospital," recalls Shailendra. What followed was their worst nightmare so far. "After a series of tests, the doctors scared the hell out of us. They told us the treatment was at best 'experimental', that she could lose her voice, her vision or be paralysed." The terrified family was informed that she would have to undergo a few more operations (also experimental in nature) to confirm the diagnosis.

The bottomline was: she might have to be in hospital for upto a month — and the process could cost anything upto ten lakh rupees.

"We had already spent around Rs 1 lakh at the hospital in one and a half days — in the general ward (in addition to whatever had been spent earlier at Gangaram and Jaipur Golden). We couldn't have borne Apollo's prices for a month."

The desperate family went LAMA (Leave Against Medical Advice) and Uma Gulati was finally operated on at AIIMS (All India Institute of Medical Sciences), where the entire process — from admission to discharge — did not take more than a week. The family now deifies Dr V.S. Mehta, the neurosurgeon who handled the case in AIIMS. "There was a world of difference in his attitude. The feeling that the doctor would be glad to see the back of you is somehow reassuring. But at these five-star hospitals, discharging you is the last thing on their minds. The longer you stay, the more they stand to gain," says Shailendra bitterly.

RUPINDER SHARMA

Inside the Indraprastha Apollo, Delhi: plush interiors, steep prices

Naresh Trehan sensed a tremendous opportunity in the field of private medicare in India, while he was working in the States. Soon after, Escorts was born

RUPINDER SHARMA

Dr Naresh Trehan, executive director, Escorts Institute

Uma Gulati got away alive. Many don't. Purnima Ghosh knows that her father was hospitalised with a liver problem in September last year. She still doesn't know why he died.

"I took him to Batra (one of Delhi's biggest private hospitals) because one

tends to think that more personal care is taken in these five-star hospitals. I have no illusions left," she says. "Leave aside personal care, even basic medical attention was unavailable. I struggled single-handedly with stretchers, waited outside with my father for almost an hour while a room was cleaned up. A dietician came before the doctor had seen him, and randomly prescribed a full meal with custard, though my father was a diabetic — and was anyway too ill to eat anything."

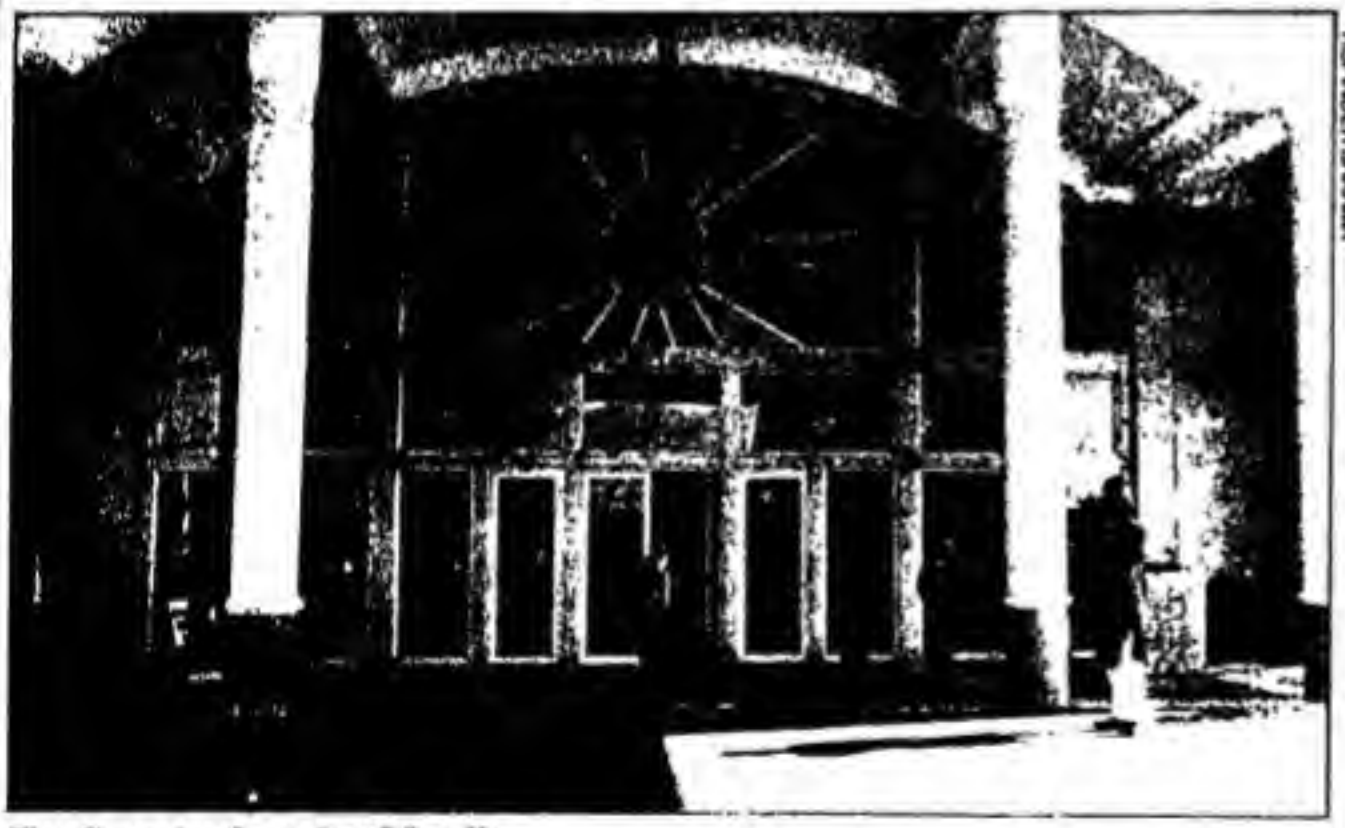
When treatment began, things got worse. "First, they told me he had cancer in the adrenalin glands (without doing a biopsy). After an endoscopy, they said he did not. Then a consultant psychiatrist suggested that my father had a rare fungal disease in the brain. After a painful lumbar puncture (to remove fluid from the spine), they said he did not." A few days later, her father died in the intensive care unit.

In this period, the only other communication from the doctors was with regard to the various advances that needed to be paid. "I would keep asking them what was wrong. When I got no response, I wanted to seek a second opinion — but the hospital refused to handover his reports," says Purnima. Till date, Batra has not handed over the case papers to the family.

Despite feeling that her father had been treated like a guinea pig, there was little that she could do. "I was not familiar with their medical jargon — certianly not enough to dispute what they had to say — and they made no attempt to help me understand what was going on," she says flatly.

Somehow machines seem to have replaced medical advice. Tests, retests and more tests. And after that, the diagnosis is usually clinical (based on the doctor's observations). Often the patient has to silently suffer such harassment. A patient undergoing treatment at one of Bombay's reputed five-star hospitals informed SUNDAY that he was forced to undergo a series of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) tests, each costing Rs 6,000. He has so far spent Rs 21,000 on these tests alone.

He was informed by other doctors in the hospital that the MRI machine had been lying idle for over three months and the hospital was attempting to recoup costs. Perhaps the most telling comment of all: he wishes to remain anonymous because "the doctors here may not treat me well if they find out".



RAVINDER SHARMA

The five-star facade of Apollo

Dr Manohar Kamat, a practising doctor and editor of the now-defunct health magazine *Body and Beauty Care* asserts that doctors in these private hospitals are given targets every month. To meet them, they generally resort to such unethical practices. And these practices don't stop at over-diagnosis — often, it also means unnecessary surgery.

For instance Ravinder Nath, a 47-year-old businessman from Faridabad, had his gall-stone removed at a multi-speciality private hospital in Delhi. Two hours into the operation, his family was told that the laparoscopic surgery had failed, and that he would now have to undergo an abdominal cut. The family agreed.

More than a month later, Nath went

back to the doctor with pus formation in the scar. It was then that the doctor accidentally let out why the laparoscopy had failed. A special thread routinely used in laparoscopic surgery was "not available in the OT that day". So, instead of two small scars Nath came back with a huge ten-inch scar diagonally across the abdomen.

Apart from the fact that the scar was not healing, Nath was also made to pay up for two hours of "failed laparoscopy", six hours of the abdominal cut and the double dose of anaesthesia required. In short, because this multi-speciality hospital did not have a thread, Nath was made to undergo and pay for two operations.

Yet, notwithstanding steep prices, consumer dissatisfaction and stray cases of negligence, five-star hospitals — usually floated by industrial houses — continue to mushroom in the bigger cities. Escorts Heart Institute in Delhi, Lilavati Hospital in Bombay, Mallaya in Bangalore, Duncan Apollo in Calcutta — the list gets longer every year.

Who do they serve and why do they flourish? Naresh Trehan, executive director of the Escorts Institute, perceived the tremendous opportunity in private medicare in the country while he was working in the States. "I must have operated on at least a 150 Indian patients in New York. It was ironic that they had to come all the way from India, only to be operated on by an Indian doctor." Tre-

RUPINDER SHARMA

A suite in Indraprastha Apollo

At Apollo, Delhi, foreigners constitute 10 to 15 per cent of the patients under treatment. It's marketing wing does at least one presentation a day, angling for its health-care packages meant for company executives

han later met the Nandas and Escorts was born.

In fact, the broad strategy for five-star hospitals is to offer an attractive alternative to treatment abroad. Apollo's advertising proposition, for instance, is: "People still go abroad for the latest treatment — to Indraprastha Apollo".

Besides having tapped into the upper middle-class Indian market, many of these hospitals also cater to a substantial foreign clientele. "We get, on an average, five patients every month from Tanzania alone. At any given time, foreigners constitute 10 to 15 per cent of the patients under treatment here," says Raza Siddiqui, chief manager, corporate relations at Apollo, Delhi. "This is a great image booster for India," he adds proudly.

But the retail patient is not their core consumer. The really big market lies in corporate India. Five-star hospitals in the country today offer a variety of preventive health-care packages to companies (*see box*) as part of their executives' perks. Apollo's marketing wing does at least one presentation a day, pitching for its packages. "In these two years, roughly 150 corporates have come in. Multinationals are already ours — even smaller 'lala' companies are coming for corporate packages," says a marketing executive of the hospital.

It has its funny side. A senior neurosurgeon recalls the ONGC director (he spent ten days in the Hinduja's hospital in Bombay) getting every check-up under the sun done on company money.

It also has its dark side. While private hospitals don't mind hosting paid holidays, most of them turn away emergency cases. They are not revenue earners. Sham Lal, the 87-year-old former editor of the *Times Of India*, was turned away by Escorts last year when he was rushed there with a heart attack. Reason given: no vacancy. A Delhi administration report for 1995 and 1996 showed Escorts had an occupancy rate of 11.33 per cent.

Besides, turning away such patients is in violation of a 1989 Supreme Court judgement that makes it binding on all hospitals to attend to emergency cases.

Despite such behaviour, five-star hospitals are quick to deny elitist labels. Says Siddiqui, "Three hundred million people in India can afford paid health care. Or, will be able to afford it with a health insurance. Privatise health insurance and leave the middle class to us. Let the government concentrate on the needs of the other 600 million."

Either Siddiqui is woefully ill-informed or just evasive. The much-touted 300 million Indian middle class consumer base does not exist. Multinationals have discovered this much to their chagrin. Even shoe companies — whose products sell at an average of Rs 1,000 — are cutting back. Admittedly, people will pay more for health care. But an average of Rs 5,000 a night as room rent? For the middle class? Most middle class people pay that much in monthly rent for their house.

RUPINDER SHARMA

Uma Gulati: Couldn't have borne Apollo's prices for a month

All said and done, private medicare may be private business. Except on two counts. First, says the laywers' union counsel Ashok Aggarwal, "If you want to make a business out of corporate health check-ups and preventive health maintenance in a country where most of the population is denied urgent medical attention — at least don't do it on public money."

And second: this business deals with life and death. And so with ethics. They cannot be debited against corporate balance-sheets. •

Chitralekha Dhamija/New Delhi and Kaajal Walia/Bombay

WRITERS' BLOC

Indian authors exchange notes with their English counterparts at a seminar in Lucknow

Seminars and seminaring tend to be tedious and monotonous affairs. The British Council's recent seminar in Lucknow, called Contemporary Writing in English, was a notable exception. The vast and impenetrable divide between academics and creative people was breached. Squawks of dialogue and articulation penetrated the languid Lucknow air, keeping at bay some of the intolerable doublespeak that doctors of literature tend sometimes to disseminate.

The English language is at a very exciting phase in its development. English is a symbiotic language. It effortlessly absorbs influences, inflections, it swallows words, digests dialects, it is open to suggestion and growth, it is the language the world speaks and understands. It is by now generally accepted that as Indians we have co-opted this great language into the mainstream of our own culture and literary tradition. Some of the greatest literary works of the last few decades have been by the emergent literature of the erstwhile colonies. The *sangam* — the confluence of social and cultural imagination has provoked a resurgence of the written word. These new writers, have, in the terminology of the new audio-visual culture of the times, "remixed" the language for their purposes.

In this context the delegation of writers, poets and wordpersons from the British Council showcased the range of indisciplinary stimulus that characterises the state of the English language today. Mathew Sweeney is an Irish poet who takes sustenance from the oral tradition. He believes that sounds as well as squiggles constitute the magic of poetry. A.L. Kennedy is a Glasgow-based novelist who is considered one of the brightest new talents in British fiction. Shena Mackay represents the continuity of all that is fine and good in the narrative tradition. Winsome Pinnock is a playwright, also very young, who pushes and provokes the language into new contours and concerns. And Farrukh Dhondy, our very own Farrukh of Poona company, has been responsible for the fusion of many multicultural strands of perception in voice, video and text.

Indian academia is well grounded in critical theory but they cannot be accused of being over-adventurous in their approach to the study of English literature. It is ironical but perhaps inevitable in the face of the antiquated monolith that is Indian Education, that little or no cognisance is taken at the level of the actual syllabus of the new renaissance in our literature.

The Lucknow seminar gave all sides of the triangle a chance to interact meaningfully in the context of their different disciplines. Practitioners of fiction like myself, Mukul Kesavan and Neelum Saran Gaur, poets like Jeet Thayil, Eunice D'Souza and C.P. Surendran and professor and heads of department from universities across the country, even Bangladesh, tried to match their perceptions on the creative process and look for a suitable critical framework within which to evaluate it.

Literary agent Giles Gordon and his publisher wife Maggie McKernan represented the other dimension of readers, buyers and market forces. Together they presented a lucid portrait of the interface between an individual talent or work of art, and its strategic positioning as both voice and artefact in the increasingly focused international book market.

SHENA MACKAY

MATHEW SWEENEY

A valuable degree of spontaneity, humour and insight characterised the interaction between these different points of perception. The literary supermarket has an integrated yet highly differentiated process structure. There is a comic and exasperating polarity between the creators and custodians of high art. Writers and poets are often unruly and irresponsible, while the habit and posture of teaching quite naturally conditions the mindset of academics. Poet-professors like Eunice D'Souza from Bombay University are a rare breed of amphibians. Her exposition of a poetic voice that is both real and structured, characterised the successful straddling of

A.L. KENNEDY

NAMITA GOKHALE

these sometimes conflicting worlds within the seminar. Richard Walker and Alastair Niven brought in a finely honed sense of modulation to prevent the highly-charged sensibilities of the litterati from going into an overdrive.

Group dynamics operate in inescapable ways, breaking down boundaries, bringing down barriers. Therefore it was no great surprise to see the rigid hierarchies of the teachers and the taught de-escalate into a delightful dynamic of dialogue and confrontation. Food and drink are a catalytic input to communication, and long words overflowed long into the evenings by the pool-side, as poetry and rhetoric spilled into the soft night in the city of nawabs and kebabs.

Unlike the increasingly pressured arenas of music, film, theatre, the creative world of writing continues to contain in its ambit a core of contemplation. It is the job of writers to sit with their laptops or their pens or just with their thoughts and take on the fundamentals of the world we live in. The creative process is tricky and impossible to document, while the critical infrastructure encompassing it is an analytic assemblage that requires clarity and precision. To participate in a synchronicity of perception of these two streams was a stimulating, even liberating experience. For, as surely as accountants crunch numbers, we wordsters live on a diet of other people's dreams. To briefly share in the reality of communicable perception was, in the language of understatement, good fun. •

Namita Gokhale/Lucknow

The vast and impenetrable divide between academics and creative people was breached. Squawks of dialogue and articulation penetrated the languid Lucknow air

Namita Gokhale is a well-known novelist and column-writer

MAJ. GEN. ASHOK K. MEHTA

CRY IN THE WILDERNESS

The President should force the government to take the defence chiefs' suggestions seriously

Is anyone listening to what the service chiefs are saying? Judging by the government's non-response and inertia in the ministry of defence (MoD), definitely not. The heads of the armed forces, responsible for the country's defence and security, are usually not permitted to communicate with the press except the in-house magazine called *Fauzi Akhbar*, now *Sainik Samachar*.

In 1993, the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) gave an interview to a newspaper and nearly lost his job. Had he stood up, he would have become a national hero and there would have been few curbs on the chiefs to interact with the media.

Service chiefs do not have any institutionalised channels of direct interaction with their political masters except by notings through bureaucrats in the MoD. The only time they get to formally present their case to the head of the government (the Prime Minister), but never to the President who is the supreme commander of the armed forces, is during the biannual army commanders' conference.

Here too, depending on the time available to the Prime Minister, each chief gets around 15 to 20 minutes sufficient only for a macro view of the state of his service. Matters get worse when the Prime Minister is one with a limited attention span or one who is suffering from insomnia and uses this time to catch up on his sleep.

Convention and rules authorise the service chiefs to meet the Prime Minister bypassing the defence minister and army commanders, the defence minister bypassing the COAS. But these avenues are open in name only. The last person to keep this route open was Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw in the early Seventies.

In the last five to six years, service rules and self-restraint have sometimes been given the go-by when the army and navy chiefs have been forced to go public about the alarming decline in operational preparedness. Such an admission was never made in the past.

While not going public, the new COAS, Gen. V.P. Malik, pulled no punches in his maiden but routine state-of-the-art review on 14 October, 1997, before the Prime Minister, defence minister, MoD officials, his colleagues and senior military commanders. Malik said his presentation would be honest and contain the harsh truth as otherwise he would be failing the nation.

There was nothing path-breaking about his concern over declining defence budgets, 13,131 officer shortages, excessive internal security duties, eroding the dissuasive deterrence and the renewed vigour and interest shown by the People's Liberation Army in disputed areas along the Line of Actual Control.

K.R. Narayanan: broke the decades-long taboo at Army Day reception. He breached the security cordon to meet the officers and their wives

But three of his comments on the role, health and operational preparedness of the army were significant. "It is dangerous to use the army against its own people; the spirit is strong but the body weak and the most telling — 'Respected Pradhan Mantriji, we cannot assure you of a decisive victory in the next war'."

Precisely ten months earlier, Malik's predecessor Gen. Shankar Roy Chowdhury bemoaned the shrinking defence budget and warned that the country would never forgive the army if it did not deliver. Roy Chowdhury hammered home the point that operational preparedness had been impaired by inadequate funding, shortage of officers and unattractive career prospects in the army.

In essence what two successive army chiefs have told the government is that the army will be unable to accomplish its mission due to the decline in its fighting efficiency. No service chief has ever before expressed misgivings in his force's operational capacity.

For many years now, generals in the Eastern Command, two former Gover-

Gen. Malik taking salute at the Army Day parade in New Delhi

Three of Gen. Malik's comments on the role, health and operational preparedness of the army were significant:

- **It's dangerous to use the army against its own people**
- **The spirit is strong but the body weak**
- **Respected Pradhan Mantriji, we cannot assure you of a decisive victory in the next war**

nors who were retired generals and Roy Chowdhury himself, had complained of a nexus between politicians and militants in the north-east. The government has turned a deaf ear.

Former Chief of Naval Staff Admiral V.S. Shekhawat was the first service chief to go public about the government's neglect of the armed forces. On 4 December, 1994, he criticised the government for the growing deficiencies in the navy, the ageing fleet and order books of shipyards going dry.

Two years later, on the eve of his retirement, the attack was more pointed. He blamed the government for systematically ensuring the decline of the navy, saying no ships had been ordered for ten years and damage had started. He added that neither politicians nor bureaucrats understand the process of development of navy and threats.

Shekhawat's criticism of the government, unprecedented as it was, was qualified by his admission, "I can do my part by informing the government." Sadly, and obviously under pressure, he retracted some of the criticism. But the message was loud and clear. Willy-nilly, Shekhawat had also raised the question of responsibiljty of the chief and accountability of the government. And, "Does a service chief merely inform the government? Or can he do something more?"

It was also in 1994 that the late General B.C. Joshi, during his presentation to Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, criticised the red tape and bureaucratic and financial procedures for the non-materialisation of the army's modernisation project. Rao was so upset that he asked the defence secretary to accompany him back to his office after the conference. Every chief has this permanent grouse against the government but civilian bureaucracy is unmoved.

Successive Chiefs of Air Staff have been kite-flying the Advanced Jet Trainer (AJT) but not a blip appeared on its acquisition radar. Similarly at least two CNSs were forced to eat their words about replacement for the retired Vikrant. Everyone knows there is no second aircraft carrier yet on the horizon.

There is obviously a dangerous gap between the thinking of the service chiefs and the government. Unlike its predecessors, the present chiefs of staff troika has not yet gone public on deficiencies on operational readiness and deterrence. The rot has completely corroded the channels of communication.

Last year, despite service chiefs being reassured by the Prime Minister that anomalies of the Fifth Pay Commission would be removed and after this was done only in part, the chiefs of staff were constrained to write a note to the government warning of a serious erosion in the morale of the armed forces.

In response to the urgings of the chiefs of the armed forces, silence should certainly not be the government's answer. Gujral is the only PM to have at least acknowledged the problems faced by the army and at least in two instances, he interrupted Gen. Malik's presentation to say, "Agreed in principle." Which translated, means, 'the bureaucracy will decide'.

It is high time that the supreme commander of the armed forces, President K.R. Narayanan, intervened to force the government to take the articulations of the service chiefs seriously before some NGO files a public interest litigation to ensure this.

Narayanan has broken the decades-old taboo at the Army House during the Army Day reception of being confined to the presidential sofa on a cement platform. This year, he breached the security cordon to meet his constituency of officers and their wives. His next task must now be to break the silence of the government by listening to the chiefs. •

(The author was a general officer commanding of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force [South] in north-eastern Sri Lanka. He is also a founder member of the Defence Planning Staff of the Chiefs of Staff Committee)

FOR LOVE OF LUCRE

Not content with just sponsorship, Indian football clubs are now themselves going corporate

Indian football is going through a change in profile: from an essentially lower middle class set-up to an elite sport with all the attendant hoopla that goes with megabucks. After a century and a half of neglect and disdain, players are getting the recognition they deserve.

When the 1998-99 season begins late next month, there will be as many as five professional clubs in the country with a few more slotted to make their debut later. The clubs changing their amateur status will be the "national club" of the country, Mohun Bagan, and its arch-rival, East Bengal. KBL FC Kochin was the first professionally run club in the country starting out last year, while two others are readying themselves for the coming season — United Bangalore FC and Bengal-Mumbai club.

Ever since the game was introduced by the British, the clubs were amateur outfits. Mohun Bagan, formed over a hundred years ago, recruited Indian youngsters who gradually fashioned themselves into a great combination. And when it beat the East Yorkshire Regiment in the IFA Shield final in 1911 it acquired a larger-than-life image. "Subjects" beating the "rulers" went down well wih the nationalists who were then fighting for independence.

By then there were several other Indian teams in the British-dominated sport. Their quality improved substantially with the formation of East Bengal Club in the early Twenties, after Mohammedan Sporting (changing its name several times, from Hamidia to Crescent, etc.) had begun to channelise Muslim talent in the country.

But none of the clubs had money to spare. They were run essentially through the munificence of society leaders. Mohun Bagan went a step further: anyone who wanted to play had to first pay his membership fee, a not inconsiderable sum of four annas.

As Sukumar (Darbari) Dutta says: "You have to remember that in the late Twenties and Thirties it was quite an amount for a school or college student." Dutta had the distinction of playing with the legendary Gostha Pal whose career spanned 30 years — a record none can ever beat.

A player was supposed to buy his own boots and shorts. The only things free were the club jersey and a glass of water with a few drops of lime! "For us, it was the indescribable thirst of playing for the club that mattered," says Dutta. "It was, for us, the ultimate in life."

The sentiment is echoed by East Bengal's Ahmed Khan. He came from Bangalore and his magical touch mesmerised the Maidan for decades. There was a roof over his head and four square meals. Nothing more.

Cheema: Rs 10 lakh a season

Succeeding generations continued to play "for the glory of the game", although financial help did start coming in. Someone's house needed finishing touches, someone else's daughter had to be married off. But no one imagined making a living out of soccer.

Until, that is, the Seventies. Money had been percolating down to the players from the Sixties but it was in the next decade that footballers were given specific "fees" for staying with a club. The amounts weren't much and all of it had to be clubbed into travel and food allowance. By the Eighties, the fees started increasing substantially with some

Both Mohun Bagan and East Bengal had not been amateur for decades because players had been paid for their services. But the taxman was kept at bay by billing expenses differently

players commanding till then unheard of sums touching a lakh and more.

From the early Nineties, prices skyrocketed. A player like Cheema could get Rs 10 lakh a season. In the mid-Nineties, Bhaichung Bhutia commanded a fee of Rs 15 lakh. Most others, however, were content with their Rs 5 lakh or so coupled with a steady job that they felt would insure their future.

Into this scenario stepped in the All India Football Federation. Television rights came in as a boon. The AIFF could think in terms of earning crores — and putting back a hefty percentage of it into the conduct of the national league on the lines of Europe and South America.

Prize money became the lure for clubs to invest in player recruitment, which included up to five foreigners. With prices soaring, it was becoming increasingly difficult for amateur clubs to build strong teams. After all, how long could individual donors sustain bills, especially when they were threatening to touch a crore and more each year?

With the advent of FC Kochin, the path to professionalism seemed to open up. Both Mohun Bagan and East Bengal started thinking of shedding the amateur tag. They had not been amateur for decades, because players were being paid for their services. But the taxman was kept at bay by billing expenses in different ways.

What both clubs feared was the reaction of members and, more important, millions of supporters across the country to the change in status. Professionalism meant the club had to become a company. With supporters not being shareholders as yet, even club members would have no say in either the policy decisions or the day-to-day running of the clubs. But then, the step had to be taken at some stage and, since opportunity was calling, there was no sense in holding back any more.

There could have been nothing better than this decision to go professional. All over the world today, soccer is a moneyed sport. Obviously, the benefits are many.

While one can't visualise a Bayern Munich in India just yet, a beginning at least has been made. It will be difficult to build up the kind of edifice on which Germany's premier club stands. It has seven football grounds of varying sizes, with an audio-visual centre, a specialised gymnasium, well-appointed kitchen and dining area. And one has to see the bulging list of eight-year-olds who apply for training each year.

Setting up such a gigantic machinery, with six age groups (from eight to ten, ten to 12, until 20), each with at least 30 hopefuls, is way beyond possibility at the moment. But a hostel, a gym and a private practice ground can easily be acquired by a professional outfit. The Kochi team already has all of these.

Training youngsters is not a public service. It is done specifically to keep a steady flow of talent into the senior team. And, in this age of phenomenal fees, a mere pittance in comparison would have to be paid for players from their own "stable" — at least for the usual contractual period of three years.

More than all this, the initial gain would be the injection of true professionalism into the sport. Even now, a majority of players are sailing on two boats — club and office. As a start, this practice will have to stop.

Players will stop it of their own accord because professional football

THE NEW-LOOK CLUBS

Mohun Bagan AC

Come April, it may have a different name. As of now, it is set to segregate the football wing and merge it with the United Breweries or add one of its brands to the club name.

Mohun Bagan had offers from other companies, notably the ITC and Tata Tea, but these came well after negotiations with the UB group were over. UB has reportedly agreed to pay Rs 1.5 crore per year to a company which will have an equal number of directors from UB and the club on the board.

There are plans to recruit foreign players (after seeing the current crop from Thailand and Nigeria) for the ensuing season. A great relief for president Swapan Sadhan (Tutu) Bose, who would not have to dole out the lakhs he had to over the past years.

East Bengal Club

Long on the lookout for finance, East Bengal had been experimenting essentially with local sponsors for some time. The idea of professionalism had been nurtured for a couple of years before the club took the plunge with UB. Although the scenario, including the club's partner in the proposed company, might change before this appears in print, the decision to go commercial is final.

The only problem with UB was the proximity of Vijay Mallya with Mohun Bagan's Tutu Bose. The way out was to demand a huge sum so that the parting of ways would not be illegal. Media mandarin Pritish Nandy promised funds that would more than match the UB figure.

Whatever the company tag, the club is determined to go ahead with its plans for modernisation. The emphasis is on a "nursery" for a steady supply of players. And the bitter experience with sub-standard foreigners will make the club wary of new signings.

KBL FC Kochin

A number of NRIs with their hearts still in Kerala were banded together by football aficionado P.V. Parel to form a trust. The trustees appointed a board of directors. While the initial outlay of well over Rs 1.5 crore was borne by the trustees, the club is expected to rope in sponsors. Hence, Kalyani Black Label came to be affixed to its name.

The club started with a bang, recruiting the best players from last year's national league champion JCT, along with talents from other states. This year, they have roped in over a dozen "graduates" from India's premier training centre, Tata Football Academy. Already they have the cream of junior talent in the country.

bolster this company.

The club has been granted affiliation to the Western India Football Association, which means it will be making its debut in local tournaments next month. It has already recruited several players. "In fact, about 80 per cent of recruitment is complete," said company chairman Ajit Karmakar. "We will get a practice pitch from the Maharashtra government," he added. In fact, it has everything except the experience of running of a football club.

Kozhikode FC

This club/company has been inspired by the success of the Kochin side and has several expatriates as financiers. It has made some progress in player recruitment, but it may be a while before its actual strength can be gauged.

[illegible] East Bengal

Bengal-Mumbai Club

Some Bengalis [illegible] added. But all Bengalis [illegible] This was the primary reason for [illegible] of those settled in Mumbai to dream up what is [illegible] football company. As the Kochin club is essentially a [illegible] holders in the [illegible]

United Bangalore FC

This is a club that all of Karnataka is looking up to. Time was when Bangalore was a leading soccer centre with several of its players doing duty for India. A revival will help local talent to flower again, with the help of the inevitable "foreign [illegible]"

stands on performance. Successive failures will put a player back in the reserves which means a percentage of their earnings will be cut. Naturally, every player would try to keep in peak form for every match. And that is not possible if one has to play for one's office team also.

The upshot would be a general improvement in standard, a fact bolstered by the presence of a few foreigners in the squad. The idea is that the foreigners would be at least a little better than the local talent and their experience and expertise would help lift the local players' level.

Professionalism will bring about other changes. A substantial insurance cover for players, for example, will bring about a sea change in attitude. Year after year, one has seen how the more intelligent players have avoided hard tackles when the club-transfer season was approaching. They preferred to play safe so that they could strike the best possible deals. Knowing that they would be "safe" even if they were sidelined by injury. would allow them to go all out in every match.

The addition of a gym would greatly benefit footballers. It has for long been recognised that footballers playing in different positions need separate regimen to enhance their respective skills. But freehand exercises are not good enough. Gym equipment will help maintain peak fitness.

A company with high liquidity would also help in the sphere of training youngsters. Both East Bengal and Mohun Bagan have built up under-16 and under-19 squads, but these will have to be streamlined and the youngsters will have to be promised a secure future. A hostel, good food and intensive training are imperative.

However, these are easier said than done. The Calcutta clubs, for example, will have to get out of the city to own their own premises. The Maidan is under the army and the clubs are subject to military diktat. Both Mohun Bagan and East Bengal had sought permission to build their own gyms. When army consent was finally obtained, the Calcutta Police put a spanner in their works. Whatever the official reason, they took exception to the fact that the clubs had not taken their permission first.

ASHOKE CHAKRABARTY

A Mohun Bagan-East Bengal match: will it evoke the same competitive flavour?

But the overall situation couldn't be better for soccer. The media craze had garnered huge advertising support for cricket which is still a minor game in the international field. With the breakthrough achieved by telecasting the inaugural national league on Star TV, sponsors finally felt football was no longer a lower middle-class sport.

With Philips leading the way, a host of sponsors have come in, what with United Breweries taking up the Federation Cup and the Lifebuoy tag fetching more money than ever for the Santosh Trophy tournament.

Clubs can now earn up to Rs 75 lakh per season, which could cover at least three-quarters of their expenses. They could sell club souvenirs which, in the West, fetch a lot of money. In short, the professional clubs could be marketed to good advantage.

With five clubs turning professional, it is reasonable to expect several more to come up soon. Already, there is talk in Kerala about another club on the lines of FC Kochin.

Soon, the move from amateur to professional soccer will be complete at least at the top level. One can then envisage the youth squads participating in the local leagues in different states and far keener competition at the national level. With each team building its own nursery, Indian standards could compare with the best in Asia within the next decade.

Football is already the best-loved game in the world. And footballers, with their pockets bulging more than those of cricketers, will get the adulation they deserve. •

Arijit Sen/Calcutta

V. GANGADHAR

Crusade without a Cause

The Times of India *begins a human rights column — much to the scepticism of the thinking classes*

When a confirmed 'non-crusader' suddenly turns into a crusader with a vengeance, the process lacks credibility. Eyebrows are raised; there are sniggers all around. The 'Human Rights Watch' programme launched by *The Times of India* has been welcomed mostly by business tycoons. The rest of the media and even human rights activists are highly sceptical about the motives behind the campaign.

The Times had always fought shy of such 'crusaders' in the past. Issues like custodial deaths, malnutrition among children or slum eviction had not stirred the conscience of the publishing group which continues to have its 'Filmfare' awards function sponsored by Manickchand *ghutka*-makers, whose large-selling products definitely constituted health hazards. Some of the fashionable editors of the paper had chided reporters who had insisted on covering malnutrition deaths of children in interior Maharashtra.

The 'Human Rights Watch' campaign followed the paper's vicious attack on the officials of the Enforcement Directorate who were alleged to have mistreated the chairman of the group, Mr Ashok Jain, a confirmed heart patient. Mr Jain had been facing charges of FERA violations. According to reports published in other dailies — mainly *Free Press Journal* and *The Statesman* — high connections enabled Mr Jain to secure anticipatory bail and even travel abroad for medical treatment.

Mr Ashok Jain may be genuinely ill. The ED officials may have overreacted a bit. But was the paper justified its crudely-orchestrated campaign against the ED whose activities had turned India into a 'banana republic'? The ED, according to *The Times* campaign, was a torture chamber where 'innocent' businessmen were put through unmentionable tortures which would have put Hitler's SS

Dhirubhai Ambani: below the belt

goons to shame. The paper even dropped its traditional 'alleged' term while referring to the 'tortures' at the ED and claimed one of the victims, Babulal Daluchia, had died of ill-treatment. Spunky columnist Varsha Bhosle pointed out in a hard-hitting front-page article in the *Free Press Journal* that Daluchia had, indeed, died, but eight months after his interrogation by the ED officials.

Hysteria and overreaction always affects the credibility of a crusade. When two senior south Indian officials of the Times group were taken away for interrogation and had to sweat it out, the group papers screamed that the entire south Indian community was up in arms against the ED. The action against Mr Ashok Jain, we were told, drew protests from Jains from all over. Now I meet quite a few Jains and south Indians every day and not one of them appeared to be concerned with the action of the ED.

One-sided, exaggerated reports never work. Remember the time when *Indian Express* under Ramnath Goenka launched a 'crusade' against Dhirubhai Ambani? Bombay Dyeing's chairman Nusli Wadia, who was the blue-eyed boy of Goenka and a force to reckon with in the *Express*, was behind the attack. The anti-Ambani articles were so one-sided and exaggerated that the *Express* totally lost its credibility on the issue. The Ambanis, of course, were no angels, but then sharp business practices were not unknown to other industrial houses.

The rest of the media, as was to be expected, were cool to the *Times'* crusade. They also believed that the campaign was entirely the work of the management with the help of a few 'willing journalists'. The majority of the editorial department had nothing to do with it. *The Free Press Journal* and *The Statesman* poured scorn on it. Well-known human rights activists like V.M. Tarkunde, Manushi Roy and Prashant Bhushan, questioned the motives behind the *Times* campaign. Some of their comments, as published in *The Pioneer*, made interesting reading: "While it is the job of a newspaper to initiate a campaign in public interest, it is an entirely different matter to start a campaign on behalf of its proprietors and pass it off as a public campaign. It is a violation of journalistic ethics for editors to highlight issues concerning the business interests of the proprietors and start a campaign on their behalf. In the particular case highlighted by the paper, there had been no human rights violations as the person concerned was given a chance to present his case on many occasions."

Veteran journalist Ajit Bhattacharjea, who is also the director of the Press Institute of India, was even harsher in his remarks. "The campaign is a glaring instance of the misuse of power by press barons. Any orchestrated campaign is a deviation from well-established norms governing journalism. What is galling is that the entire campaign has been unbalanced so far. There has been no mention anywhere in the campaign about the charges levelled against the proprietor and the reasons for starting a human rights campaign in the first place."

Fellow industrialists and ad agencies, of course, supported the *Times* crusade and attacked the ED. But that was to be expected. What do industrialists like Bharat Ram or H.P. Nanda know of human rights? It was the *jaatwala* feeling which coloured their remarks on the ED. Did they also think that alleged FERA violators should be honoured with the Bharat Ratna which the Gujral government has been handing out in profusion?

The Times or any other newspaper is fully entitled to expose the excesses committed by any government department. But the readers expect the approach to be balanced. How many of us can believe that because of the ED activities, we are now a 'banana republic'? By adopting this one-sided, shrill approach, the *Times* is damaging its own case.

The Beautiful People

Sir,

On 26 January, there was a colour photograph of Cindy Crawford on page one in *The Pioneer* and despite the fact that the country was also observing its 48th Republic Day, a tiny national flag in black-and-white was printed, with an inconspicuous greeting at the bottom of the page. Of late, the front page of *The Pioneer* has been graced by cinestars like Vinod Khanna, Gauthami and Rishi Kapoor. On 21 January, news of the appointment of Justice M.M. Punchhi as the Chief Justice of India appeared. I looked for his photograph but in vain.

There were photographs of Prime Minister I.K. Gujral, railway minister Ram Vilas Paswan and beaming Indian cricketers after the match at Dhaka. There was no photograph of Ms Anita Dutt receiving the Ashoka Chakra for her valiant son Second Lt. Puneet Dutt, awarded posthumously, even in the inside pages. But there was definitely space for Vijayashanti, a film actress. Well, to conclude, *The Pioneer*, it seems, prefers pretty profiles.

(A 'Letter to the Editor' from Garima Yadav published in The Pioneer*)* •

Cindy Crawford: pretty profile

SOUTHERN SATELLITES

Private channels in the south take to psephology and election coverage in a big way

■ At one of her political rallies, a section of the crowd tried to shout Jayalalitha down demanding that she pass the microphone to MDMK's Gopalasamy who, incidentally, was not present. Jayalalitha was furious. The incident was shown on Sun TV — to create a rift between the two.

■ On a propaganda blitzkrieg, Jayalalitha made JJ TV her mouthpiece. She faltered nevertheless, a clearly anti-incumbency tide sweeping her out in the 1996 elections.

■ With three daily news bulletins, the Malayalee channel Asianet seems to have become the voice of the CPI(M). Veteran communist E.M.S. Namboodiripad comes on once a week where he pontificates his views. So does chief minister E.K. Nayanar who appears on a weekly phone-in programme where he attempts to provide workable solutions to problems.

■ All DMK ministers patronise Sun TV. Recently, P. Selvaraj, a minister in Karunanidhi's cabinet, waited more than 15 minutes outside a polling booth so that Sun TV crew could videograph him for the day's news.

■ Media mogul Ramoji Rao's Eenadu TV is said to be 'soft' on Chandrababu Naidu.

Bias, political leverage, deciding the electorate's mind, that floating mass who can sway the final outcome...television journalism is all about information. 'The key', as Prannoy Roy calls it, that prises open staunch, stubborn loyalties. It's everywhere, and the south, too, doesn't lag. And so the glut of channels and their news programmes — the real cornerstone of a channel. It's penetrative and decisive, though it's the second one that's more important. Consider this:

Sun TV's Kalanidhi Maran, son of former union industry minister Murasoli

Sun TV's Kalanidhi Maran is today as powerful as Rajnikant in Tamil Nadu because of the sheer reach of his channel

Maran and grandnephew of chief minister Karunanidhi, is today as powerful as Rajnikant in Tamil Nadu because of the sheer reach of his channel. Considered the sultan of satellite channels in the south, Maran, apart from Sun TV, has the Gemini TV in Telugu, Udaya TV in Kannada and will soon launch the Malayalee channel Soorya TV.

1996 was Tamil Nadu's first 'TV elec-

Karunanidhi: Sun TV was a handy tool to slam Jayalalitha

tion' and Sun had championed the cause of the DMK-TMC front which made a clean sweep. For 1998, too, the same political combine depended heavily on Sun TV. It's a different matter that the DMK-TMC combine hasn't performed to expectations.

When the channel was launched in 1993, it was more film-based. Today, it's news that forms the main staple with its 8 pm news telecast more popular than Madras Doordarshan's 8.30 pm Tamil news. In addition, Sun has five other news bulletins. That Sun's 8 pm news has already booked advertising time for the next six months is a pointer to its popularity. "We have a 10-minute gap in our news to accommodate the ads," says Kalanidhi Maran. "To top it all, Sun TV's 8 pm news is its highest-rated programme with a television rating point (TRP) of 60. No other channel in India can achieve even half that TRP for their news programmes."

Rabi Bernard is the southern equivalent of Prannoy Roy, Rajat Sharma and Karan Thapar. One of the brains behind Sun TV's success, Bernard left after he fell out with Maran

Maran, who started Sun news in April 1996, revolutionised television news down south at a time when Jayalalitha and her JJ TV were on a propaganda blitzkrieg. Maran, say those opposed to Jayalalitha, was at the right time in the right place. The 1996 parliamentary polls were round the corner and so were the state Assembly elections. The Congress had aligned with the AIADMK, an alliance which drove a wedge in the state unit of the Congress. Out of the rift was born the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC).

This was the opportunity that Karunanidhi had been waiting for and Sun proved a handy tool. It was literally a *coup de grace* as Jayalalitha — already unpopular — and her AIADMK were pulverised. The bottomline was simple: for those who had switched allegiance, Sun TV news was the Gospel truth. A survey of 400 families in Madras conducted by the Media Advocacy Group showed that people 'instinctively' resisted the brainwashing of JJ TV. Though, what really turned the tide against Jayalalitha was Tamil superstar Rajnikant's appeal through Sun TV to support the DMK-TMC front. Those who saw Rajnikant's campaign remember one sententious one-liner: "Even God cannot save Tamil Nadu if Jayalalitha comes to power again." Provocative and persuasive, it effectively broke Jayalalitha's campaign.

Since then, and especially after Karunanidhi became chief minister, Sun TV and its news have been on a roll. The most potent weapon in the hands of the DMK, it is clearly ahead of the two other Tamil channels, liquor baron Vijay Mallya's Vijay TV and Rajendran's Raj TV.

If Sun TV has been promoting the DMK, Mallya's Vijay TV has been according more visibility to Jayalalitha in her campaign against Karunanidhi. Rabi Bernard, the channel's director of programming and operations, is the southern equivalent of Prannoy Roy, Rajat Sharma and Karan Thapar. Bernard, who was earlier with Sun TV but left after he fell out with Maran, was instrumental in Sun's taking off in a big way. Now, he provides the cutting edge to Vijay TV's political coverage. And in

REACHING OUT

The satellite channels did just that — but DD was a failure

Sun TV was confident. The DMK seemed likely to repeat its 1996 success when, along with the TMC, it had pummelled Jayalalitha's AIADMK into pulp. Sun's own exit poll predicted another clean sweep for the combine. Or, so they thought.

Because, when the counting began on the morning of 7 March, it was just a matter of time before all its predictions went awry. By afternoon it had become clear that Jayalalitha was on a comeback trail. It was a Catch-22 situation for Sun. Blatantly pro-DMK, even the slightest enthusiasm about the verdict would be frowned upon. Nor could it analyse DMK's debacle. That would be exposing the shortcomings of Karunanidhi's rule.

Veerapandian, Sun's political anchor, told one of the panelists to go soft on the DMK as Karunanidhi was watching it live! In fact, no political leader, other than DMK partymen, was willing to go for discussion on the channel. Finally, Sun ended up showing film songs with results coming in as flash news on the screen.

Meanwhile, Eenadu TV, the Telugu channel, had hired space at the VSNL office in Madras and put up a temporary studio there. They flew in ace journalists from Delhi like T.V.R. Shenoy, Kuldip Nayar and Janardan Thakur to join their panel headed by Sanjay Baru and psephologist Narasimha Rao (who did the exit poll for Doordarshan). Said V.V. Rao, technical adviser to Eenadu TV: "The election programme may have cost us around Rs 50 lakhs for three days including VSNL uplink charges. But it's worth it as it has given us high visibility all over the country."

Even Asianet did a good job on the post-election coverage. Operating live from their temporary studio set-up at Kerala House in New Delhi,

Satellite upsetting all calculations

this channel used a mobile transmission system called Satellite News Gathering (SNG) terminal.

But where the satellite channels scored, Doordarshan was a failure. If the strength of these private channels lay in their choice of panelists as also wide coverage, there was practically no panel discussion in regional languages on Doordarshan.

This is what a senior officer at Madras Doordarshan had to say about the channel's conspicuous absence: "Due to the Delhi-centric policy of Prasar Bharati, the private southern channels stole the march. People in Madras had to get satellite connection to know what is happening in their own state. In the south as the DD telecast was in Hindi."

Kerala, it's the Malayalam channel Asianet that seems to have become the voice of the CPI(M). Says chief executive officer Sasikumar, "I may be personally inclined towards the Left. But Asianet is totally unbiased and neutral. Unlike some other channels, we don't have a political origin."

Asianet has reasons to be happy. Asianet Poll '98, the half-hour daily election special in English anchored by C.P. Chandrasekhar and Sasikumar, was perhaps the best current affairs programme on TV. The channel led the opinion poll sweepstakes and discussed their polls conducted with the Centre for Media Studies, one covering the whole of India and the other specific to Kerala.

Even Eenadu TV's Telugu News has a wide coverage. It was the first to break the news that Sitaram Kesri had withdrawn support to the United Front. Among the bigwigs it has interviewed are West Bengal CM Jyoti Basu and Atal Behari Vajpayee.

The glut of private channels has also meant that politicians are getting increasingly television savvy. It all boils down to exposure. The more the exposure, the greater the familiarity. And that is what counts in the end. The southern channels have realised this and are making the most of it. •

Sreedhar Pillai/Madras

BIHAR

Killing fields

Caste-related violence and gang wars engulf the state after the polls

KRISHNA MURARI KISHAN

AT THE RECEIVING END: *injured voters in Hajipur*

Bihar has done it again. After the recently-concluded parliamentary elections, caste tension, leading to clashes and murders, has come to the fore. And both political parties as well as the government machinery are bearing the brunt of post-poll violence. For the poll observers too, the election turned out to be quite a 'horror show'. Gang wars are breaking out, and Bihar is showing that power actually flows from the barrel of the gun.

After the first phase of poll, an irate mob went berserk in Giridih. They were up in arms against the administration because four poll officials were killed in the Giridih parliamentary constituency. The mob set ablaze a car belonging to a central observer. According to reports, the observer and his driver were saved providentially.

Even as the ruling Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) looked a contented lot, other political parties kept up their demand for a "free and fair" election in the state. And in Madhepura, RJD national president and former chief minister Laloo Prasad Yadav, hell-bent on securing victory with record margin, went overboard. Laloo's overzealous supporters took over booths and clashed with the supporters of Janata Dal president Sharad Yadav.

In addition to the usual poll-related violence, caste tension

has become palpable in Madhepura after large-scale rigging which deprived Yadavs from casting their votes. The rigging in Madhepura was reportedly masterminded by none other than Rajput strongman Anand Mohan, who is also the RJP candidate from Sheohar.

In other parts of Bihar, two persons were killed in the Hajipur parliamentary constituency and caste-related tension has engulfed around 25 villages. At Digghikala village under Hajipur Sadar police station, Lashmi Paswan, his wife and five others were beaten up because they did not cast votes as per directives given by RJD workers. In Jadua, Ramashankar Giri and his wife, Shanti — both supporters of Ram Vilas Paswan — were brutally assaulted. Their hands were fractured.

But the worst hit perhaps has been the Motihari parliamentary constituency in north Bihar. In the first major post-poll incident which claimed the life of a candidate, Samajwadi Party (SP) nominee Devendra Nath Dubey and four others were gunned down on 23 February.

According to reports, Devendra Nath Dubey, a don-turned-politician, was killed at midnight by criminals clad in police uniform. The incident took place 22 km away from Motihari town. Dubey and his associates, on their way to Bariyapur village, were intercepted by the assailants who opened fire from sophisticated AK-47 assault rifles. The goons were also carrying 9-mm automatic pistols and country-made guns.

According to state home secretary, R.K. Singh, the vehicle in which Dubey and his companions were travelling took in more than 60 bullets. And the killers, after doing their 'job', disappeared in a Tata Sumo and a couple of other getaway vehicles which were standing by.

KRISHNA MURARI KISHAN

BODYCOUNT: *bullet-ridden Devendra Dubey*

An FIR has been lodged by Dubey's brother, naming state energy minister Brij Behari Prasad as the main accused. Rama Devi, Prasad's wife, is the RJD nominee from Motihari parliamentary constituency who was contesting Dubey. Prasad, apparently persuaded Laloo and secured a party ticket for his wife who acted as a front for her husband.

Angry hills

Polling turns violent in Darjeeling

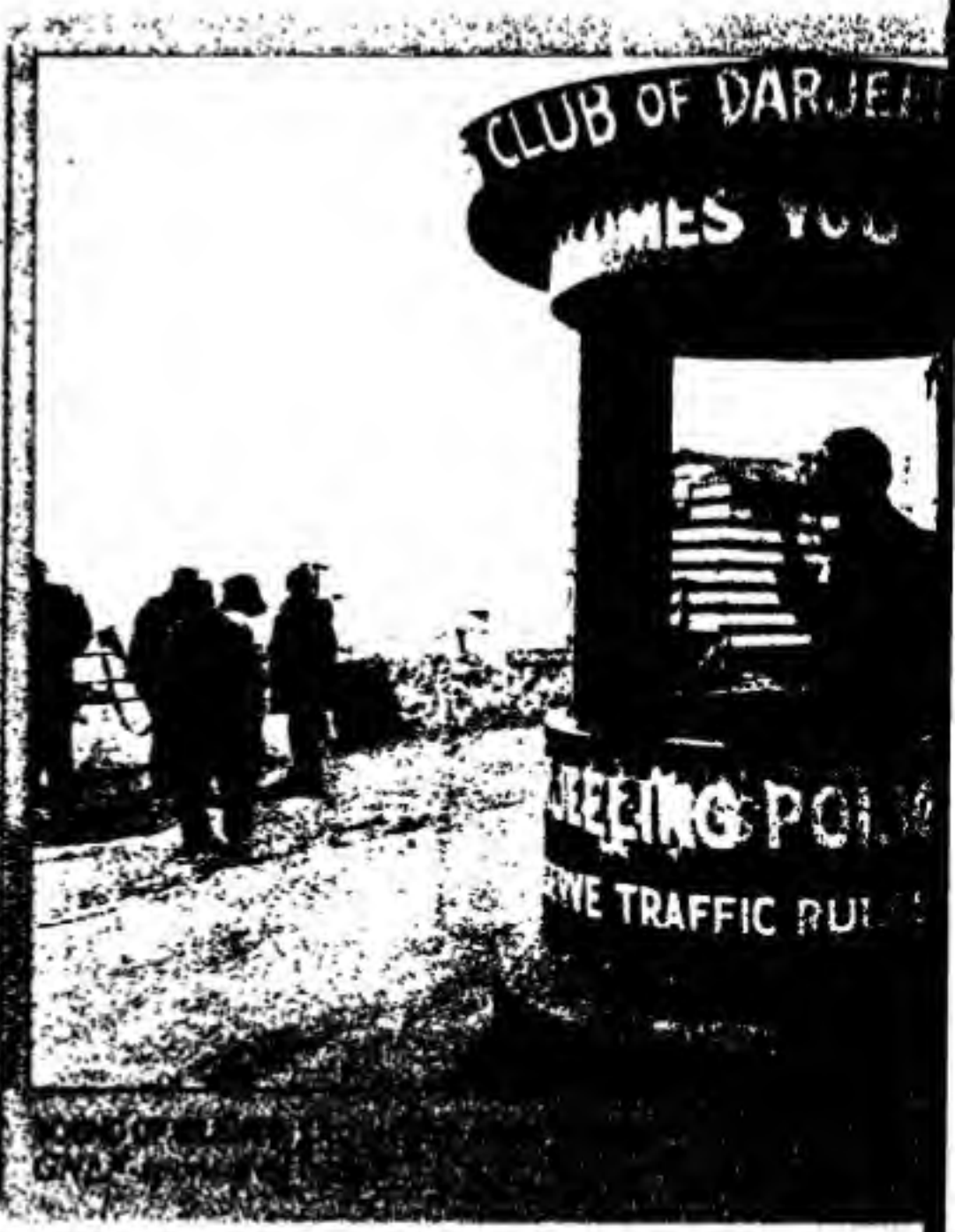
After polling was over on 22 February, a beaming chief electoral officer (CEO) of West Bengal was all praise for the district magistrate and the police supet of Darjeeling. He felt that polling had been peaceful in the state's northern tip.

But the CEO's optimism was not shared by others. That very night, three people lost their lives — two Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League (ABGL) activists in Mirik and one person — a CPI(M) activist — at a tea estate under Naxalbari police station, following large-scale post poll violence.

Tension was palpable in the hills ever since GNLF supremo Subash Ghisingh called for poll boycott along with a 72-hour *bandh* in the hills from 20 February. Only a handful of people dared to venture out on the polling day. According to Darjeeling DM Navin Prakash, 15.5 per cent votes were polled in the three Assembly segments in the hills. The figure was not insignificant, considering the twin clamp-down.

But I.N. Pradhan, president of the Kurseong unit of the GNLF, differed on the polling figures. He also complained of rigging. With only 4 per cent votes cast in Mirik, GNLF leader R.P. Waiba looked a satisfied man.

On 22 February, two booths at Lava and Londhe, under Kalimpong subdivision, were ransacked, allegedly by GNLF supporters. According to Darjeeling ADM Vivek



Dubey, on the other hand, went into hibernation after he was accused of being instrumental in the murder of Samata Party leader Pramod Singh. On 21 February — a day before the hustings — the High Court stayed Dubey's arrest, following which, Dubey came out in the open.

An MLA from the Govindganj Assembly segment of East Champaran, Dubey was known for his maverick ways. Prior to the elections, he had gone ahead and threatened Brij Behari Prasad. "I'll riddle him with bullets even inside the Assembly, should he dare to capture booths," Debey reportedly had boasted. Sources sympathetic to his family pledge that the murder will be avenged.

Equally disturbing incidents of violence have been reported from the Nawada parliamentary constituency. Here, criminals owing allegiance to the ruling RJD have let loose a reign of terror after the elections. Supporters of RJD candidate Malti Devi and BJP nominee Kameshwar Paswan are believed to be itching for a showdown.

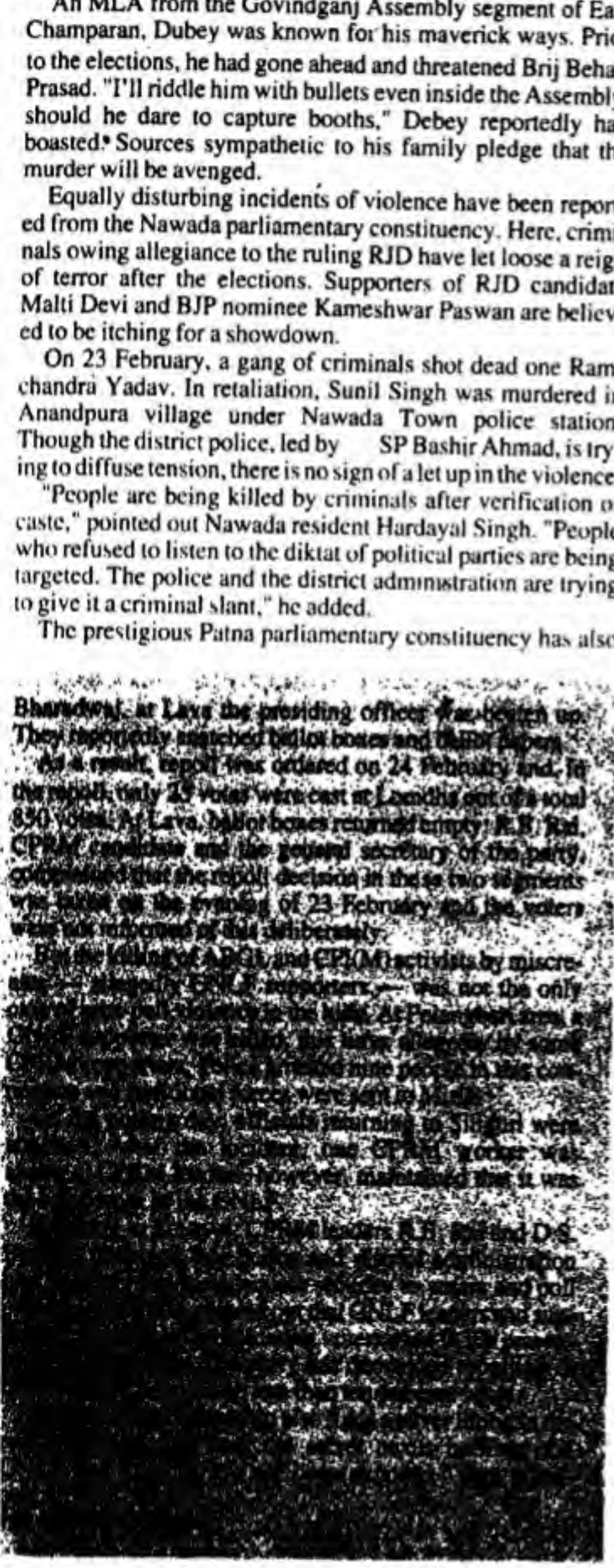
On 23 February, a gang of criminals shot dead one Ramchandra Yadav. In retaliation, Sunil Singh was murdered in Anandpura village under Nawada Town police station. Though the district police, led by SP Bashir Ahmad, is trying to diffuse tension, there is no sign of a let up in the violence.

"People are being killed by criminals after verification of caste," pointed out Nawada resident Hardayal Singh. "People who refused to listen to the diktat of political parties are being targeted. The police and the district administration are trying to give it a criminal slant," he added.

The prestigious Patna parliamentary constituency has also been sitting on a powder keg. With election deferred till 30 March, resentment prevails among RJD workers. On the other hand, the BJP supporters are a jubilant lot with countermanded elections in the state capital.

Bullet-for-bullet scenario prevails in Bihar today. And the ballot has become incidental. •

Naved Zahir/Patna



ORISSA

The answer is 'No'

Fed up with empty promises, voters in parts of the state decide to boycott the elections

Is voting the duty of a citizen or is it a mere transaction involving quid pro quo? Voting, or the lack of it, across different parts of Orissa, especially in the tribal areas, seem to indicate that more and more people are demanding their pound of flesh. The message to politicians is clear: solve our problems, or else we will not vote.

Take, for instance, the Phulbani parliamentary constituency. More than 20,000 voters in nine booths in Daringibari block, 15 booths in Kotagarh block and seven booths in Tumudibandh block stayed away en masse on 22 February. Nearly 30,000 voters in other booths from the blocks — where boycott was partial — did not cast their votes.

On the same day, residents of Raigada village, in Dhenkanal district, boycotted the polls. Raigada has 134 registered voters; not a single one came. Similarly, people at the Keonjhar parliamentary constituency also boycotted the polls. And in almost all cases, they were protesting against the indifferent attitude of the leaders whom they elected last time.

Apart from total or partial boycotts, there were less people this time queueing up to cast their votes. In Koraput — a reserved constituency for Scheduled Tribes — early estimates put the figure to 47 per cent, down from 53 per cent in 1996. This was also true for constituencies like Nawarangpur, Phulbani, Bolangir, Dhenkanal and Keonjhar.

Poll personnel in Orissa have taken note of the fact that people have, this time, eagerly responded to the boycott calls

NEGLECTED LOT: *tribals in Orissa*

UMAPRASAD MISRA

given by local pressure groups and NGOs. Workers belonging to NGOs like the Utkal Navajiban Mandal (UNM), Lokmandal and other persuaded the tribals of Kotgarh, Daringibari and Tumudibandh (especially the Kutiya Kondh tribe) to keep away from the booths.

In fact, a meeting was convened last month in Belghar — in Phulbani district — where at least 150 Kutiya Kondhs gathered. UNM working president Netra Manseth and leaders like Dhobendri Mohapatra urged tribals not to cooperate with the authorities. "We should not cooperate with this government which wants to oust us from our land," UNM leaders were reported to have said.

Speaking to SUNDAY, Mohapatra revealed that the state authorities (through the Phulbani district collector) have already sent eviction notices to tribal villagers. The government wants to set up a reserve forest in the Kotgarh area. But the tribals — living here for centuries — would not vacate their land. Eviction became a contentious election issue, with tribals from the area resorting to boycott.

But the authorities have a different story to tell. Speaking to SUNDAY, chief conservator of forest Saroj Patnaik said: "There is no such proposal at all." According to the Phulbani district collector, in 1981, the state government had declared a large area comprising Mundigarh, Laser, Bundari and Srirampur as reserved forest.

As per the notification, tribals living here prior to 1981 would face no problem. Only those who encroached upon the jungles — who are usually outsiders and non-tribals — were affected. Surprisingly, no protests were heard in the last 17 years that the arrangement was in place.

In Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar parliamentary constituencies, nearly 70,000 people stayed away from the booths. Their grievance was that their names did not figure in the tribals' list.

Grievances seem to be unending. In Jaipur district, 80 families of Kesharpada village stayed away because they had no electricity. In the same district, voters from ten panchayats in Dharmasala block refused to vote because a bridge had not been built.

In Bangriposhi Assembly segment, 20 villages decided not to go to the polling booths because these were situated away from their homes. "If you want us to vote then set up booths in our village. We would not go to other villages to cast our votes," was the refrain. Even retired government employees of the Orissa State Transport Corporation decided to boycott polls. Reason: they had not received their pension for the last ten months.

But does boycotting solve problems? According to Kishan Patnaik, social worker, "It is futile to choose between one party and another. So the only way for people to save themselves is by boycotting all the parties and organise themselves to find people who are not corrupt, will serve them selflessly and will abide by the decisions taken by their electors."

But there are also tribals in Koraput who feel that voting is their duty, come what may. According to Bearaj Singh, SP of Rayagada district under Koraput parliamentary constituency, though Naxalite outfits like the PWG had given a call for boycott, some tribals in his area refused to keep away. And despite such noble sentiments, Koraput, this time, has recorded one of the lowest polling rates.

The writings on the wall are clear. But are politicians reading them? •

Surendra Patra/Bhubaneswar

NAGALAND

Signs of hope

The Nagaland ceasefire monitoring cell begins work on an optimistic note

Decades-old adversaries sat face to face, discussing ways to preserve a seven-month-old ceasefire. A high-power ceasefire monitoring cell met at a private hotel in Dimapur on 19 February to chalk out the modalities of enquiring into the violation of ceasefire ground rules agreed upon by the Government of India (GOI) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland [NSCN(I-M)] on 12 December 1997 in New Delhi. K. Padmanabhaiah, officer on special duty (Nagaland) in the PMO represented the GOI and 'Major-general' V.S. Atem, the NSCN(I-M).

Shortly after the first formal meeting of the 15-member cell, its chairman R.D. Kapur, additional secretary, Union home ministry, disclosed that both sides had agreed to lodge written complaints to the concerned authorities of the 'violators'. "We would like to resolve any such problem that crop up at local level," he stated. Earlier, on 13 February, the first formal meeting of the cell fell through because of lack of quorum after NGO leaders failed to turn up.

Kapur also revealed that during their in-camera discussions, they had brought a few cases of ground rule violations — cases of threat, intimidation, extortion etc. (intelligence reports confirm a rise in such activities) — to the notice of the NSCN representatives. The NSCN representative assured that action would be taken against erring workers whenever cases of violation were brought to the party's notice. However, the NSCN representatives also reported to have

NO ELECTIONS NOW: *human rights leader Neingulo Krome*

PRADEEP PAREEK

PRADEEP PAREEK

SITTING PRETTY: *NGO leaders at a rally in Dimapur*

said that most of these cases were the works of anti-socials.

Kapur said that the ceasefire, which has been in force for the last seven months (from 1 August, 1997) had been, by and large, successful and that the people of the state had welcomed it. Factional clashes and ambushes on the security forces had been reduced, he claimed.

The meeting was, however, boycotted by representatives of the various NGOs who are members of the newly-constituted 15-member cell. The NGOs chose to stay away because of what they felt was an "obstinate stand taken by the Centre to go ahead with the holding of elections". NGO leaders Neingulo Krome and V. Yepthomi, in a letter to the state home department, cited the refusal of the Centre to defer the elections in the state as the primary reason for their decision.

They also maintained that the Action Committee of the Naga Hoho and NGOs did not approve of a bureaucrat heading such a sensitive body. They suggested that a person with "recognised political and social background" should be leading it.

"It is unfortunate that the NGOs have mixed up ceasefire with the elections due to, perhaps, some misunderstanding," said Kapur. And regarding NGOs' objection to a bureaucrat heading the cell, Kapur says the composition of the body was agreed upon by the GOI and the NSCN. The NGOs had, in their letter, promised to discuss the matter in their Action Committee. "Let them decide and come back. We would certainly like them to be part of the cell," says Kapur.

Despite the NGO boycott, Kapur said that a "cordial atmosphere" prevailed in the meeting and a "good beginning" had been made. The primary task of the cell, he said, was to ensure that the ceasefire ground rules were implemented to arrive at a meaningful dialogue for peace.

Will the NSCN settle for anything short of sovereignty? The party's representative 'Col' Phungthing skirted the question, saying, "That you have to ask to our higher-ups—the collective leadership."

And what if the peace process failed? "I am ready to go back to the jungle again, and fight," was the prompt reply. •

Pradeep Pareek/Kohima

High drama

From politics to soaps, the week had an overdose of excitement

High drama marked the week gone by in real life and in fiction, and we lapped on, rapt.

In *Untamed Amazonia*, on Discovery, a bunch of tapirs frolicked, and other animals, only to be found in the basin of the mighty Amazon, disported themselves by the waterside. The drama is inherent in the manner in which the brilliant-hued birds and indolent mammals coexist with lethal predators, in time-honoured jungle harmony. It was rare, fascinating footage.

The political creatures in Uttar Pradesh, were, on the whole, less civilised, as they engaged in another smash-and-grab bid for power. Kalyan Singh and Jagdambika Pal took turns in appearing jubilant and crestfallen, as the hangers-on jostled to be part of the frame. In these times, TV is invaluable; even the most purple prose cannot capture the rabid hunger for visibility on the part of those who lust for that seat.

This is being written a little before the two claimants make their move on the floor of the UP house. Meanwhile, all news bulletins have gleefully reported on the absence

NEVER A DULL MOMENT: *a scene from* **Banegi Apni Baat**

of microphones, which were used as missiles last year, when a similar unseemly struggle took place between Kalyan Singh and Mayawati. By the time you read this, you will know whether other weapons were employed.

Life has been equally exciting among the soapsuds. In one of my favourites, *Banegi Apni Baat*, all kinds of things have been happening. Priyanka is in hospital, in terrible shape after delivering a premature baby who has jaundice and is hovering between life and death. Priyanka's lawyer Kabir is all hollow-eyed because he's staying up nights, preparing the brief for his client: his opponent is his father, whose client is Priyanka's wicked mother-in-law.

Still with us? The House of Malhotra is also in turmoil in Swabhimaan. Episode 613 last week gave us a pregnancy and a conspiracy. The girl won't marry the man who is responsible (ah, these modern females), and the man who was behind the bomb blast remains undiscovered because Karan, everyone's fall guy, is still protesting his innocence.

Hang in there: the drama is only going to escalate. •

SUNDAY WEEK

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 8 MARCH, 1998

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

Employers/superiors may ask you to put in some overtime. Personal plans can be disrupted as a result. Friends can be a bit uppity and can consequently land themselves in trouble with the authorities. More patience is required if arguments are to be avoided. New resolutions must be made.

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

You may unexpectedly receive the go-ahead. People who were initially opposed to your plans and schemes can now completely reverse their views. Their active help and encouragement are now available. Special favours will be granted. Handle tax, insurance and official business by correspondence.

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

A lively and constructive week. But you must take full advantage of the favourable conditions. Don't allow other distractions to pull you away from the job at hand. It is best not to indulge co-workers who want to waste time. It will be well worth your while to keep your nose to the grindstone.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

Bright and original ideas will grip you. Artists, designers and writers can have an enjoyable and productive week. Get manuscripts ready to deliver to publishers. Try buying and selling art and crafts products. Do a bit of creative writing.

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

Take things easy so that you are able to recharge your depleted energy resources. It will be unwise to take on heavy tasks or responsibilities. Employers or other influential people should be turned to only as a last resort: they can be most resentful at having their free time interrupted.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

Catch up on lost time or wasted opportunities. By working extremely hard and ignoring distractions at work, deadlines can be beaten. Useful advice or practical help can come from family members where financial matters are concerned.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

People may be preparing the ground for your downfall or undoing by lulling you into a false sense of security. They may also be doing you favours or allowing you to get on top of things with ulterior motives in mind. Stay on your guard and don't allow yourself to fall into their trap.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

If you are looking for a place to buy, you may find a better deal in the rental market. Long-term agreements have their advantages; but you may be weighed down by new commitments. Don't load yourself with obligations you can do without.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

Get yourself some time off work, especially if you're planning a long weekend away. The products of your artistic and creative genius can receive critical praise and the general acceptance that they deserve. New markets, clients or commissions can be won. This could be the beginning of good times.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

Aspirations to be a poet or a writer should be taken seriously. Pleasure and entertainment plans should run on schedule and can be most enjoyable. Take courage in both your hands if you are harbouring a secret affection for someone: ask him/her out for dinner or to see a show with you.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

High-quality work and efficiency are likely to be rewarded financially by employers. If you have worked consistently through the year, you may well be allowed to take time off now. But it would be a mistake to leave while urgent matters lie ahead. Tidy up home affairs before they pile on any further.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

The weeks begins on a bright note. But romantic plans may be disrupted: you may have to disappoint loved ones or be disappointed by them. Keep your cool as you will later regret angry or irritable remarks made now. The family will be supportive. •

Fighting all the way

■ Arjun Singh is having a tough time living up to his pre-election boasting. Before the polling started, he was believed to have told his friends that if he was asked to contest from the Hoshangabad seat, he would win by a margin of over 3 lakh votes.

As the campaign warmed up, he had to scale down the margin and then forget about it altogether, just concentrating on scraping through. It was back to basics, and every complaint mattered: so when people in the villages said that his security was preventing them from accessing him for their problems, Arjun Singh disbanded his Black Cat commandos and told them to stay at home while he worked.

Arjun Singh: leaving nothing to chance

And on the last day, his campaign managers played their last card: they announced that Arjun Singh was the country's future star, the *bhavi Pradhan Mantri*. Arjun Singh obviously feels that life outside the Lok Sabha [illegible]

HEARD IN LUCKNOW

Kalyan Singh should be called Kalayan Singh. He has a black heart.

AN ANGRY MAYAWATI SUPPORTER AFTER THE BSP LEGISLATORS VOTED FOR KALYAN SINGH AS CHIEF MINISTER

Darjeeling blues

■ Subhash Ghising, the uncrowned king of Darjeeling and the chairman of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), would have laid down his life for her, if only she'd asked him to. Leaving the Darjeeling seat uncontested for the Congress(I), was a very small gesture. All he wanted was a personal invitation from Sonia Gandhi to tea at 10 Janpath, and a personal request from her to help the Congress win the seat "In the interest of secular forces".

And did she do that? No she didn't. Instead, she listened to Pranab Mukherjee's whisper campaign about what a bounder Ghising is, how he's anti-national and a foreign agent.

Because Sonia wouldn't see him and the Congress(I) was spreading drivel about him, Ghising announced a three-day *bandh* in Darjeeling before the day of the election. The result was a 12 per cent dedicated CPI(M) turnout. Everyone else stayed away from the election and the CPI(M) won the seat.

Now not only has Ghising proved the point that he's the uncrowned king of the Darjeeling hills, but also that the Congress has lost the seat for the next five years, in a situation where it needs every single seat. And he says it is up to Sonia Gandhi to decide whether he is anti-national or Pranab Mukherjee is pro-CPI(M).

With(out) help from friends

■ In the whole campaign, Madhya Pradesh was probably the only state where the Congress(I) candidates actually begged the chief minister, Digvijay Singh, to stay away from their constituencies. Such is Singh's track record that most Congress candidates found he was proving to be a liability rather than an asset.

Singh stayed away from both Arjun Singh and Ajit Jogi, who pointedly snubbed him and didn't invite him to campaign. Hardly surprising, given Singh's relationship with them.

But even friends like Kamal Nath didn't want the chief minister around. The only time Digvijay went to Chhindwara was when he tagged along with Sonia Gandhi. Nath has not forgotten the last by-election in Chhindwara when the chief minister worked against him.

So when Digvijay offered to campaign for Kamal Nath, he was told politely that the only way he could help was by leaving. Nath told friends that the difference between the last election and this one was that last time, he had the help of the chief minister and 13 ministers. This time he was on his own. Last time, he lost the election. •

CHECK-LIST

Funny campaign speeches: the best of the best

■ **Atal Behari Vajpayee:** People are asking for votes because they are widows, because their families made sacrifices. What about me? Should I also say that I am a bachelor so I made the greatest sacrifice for my country and so people should vote for me?

■ **Ram Vilas Paswan:** When a labourer goes home after working all day, he asks for his wages as a matter of right. I too am asking you for my wages.

■ **Shatrughan Sinha:** *Desi* Rabri is as bad as *videshi* Rabri.

■ **Rusel Mody:** (Addressing a crowd of 66 people)...and I will make sure there is no (turning to his colleague): "*Arrey* what is the Hindi word for corruption?"

■ **Devi Lal:** (With a burp after finishing a lunch of a couple of thick *rotis*, *sabzi*, *dal*, *dahi*, a huge glass of *lassi*, etc.)....If you want to see a better India, vote for the *chashma* (spectacles, his election symbol).

■ **Deve Gowda:** A newspaper proprietor brought me down from prime ministership, people should give a fitting reply to journalists and television reporters who don't give me coverage only because I wear a dhoti.

Oh, for a place in the sun

Barely has Atal Behari Vajpayee managed to get his place in the sun that L.K. Advani 's followers are already jostling people in the BJP out so that there's some place for their leader.

First, Advani milked the Coimbatore bomb blasts issue for all it was worth. Although BJP general secretary M. Venkaiah Naidu was called to the home ministry and warned that there could be some bomb blasts in Coimbatore as tension was building up there, Advani ignored the advice of the home ministry and carried on regardless.

L.K. Advani: making his presence felt

After the blast had occurred and more than 50 people had died, he went to all the hospitals consoling the families of the dead. Then, he announced that he had been the intended victim of the blast, that there had been a human-bomb involved, and it was all a plot to kill him.

Advani thought the BJP would create hysteria in India, but nothing of the sort happened. When the party couldn't manage the kind of sympathy it was hoping for, it got another opportunity when the UP government collapsed.

Vajpayee declared that he would go on a fast "as long as his health permitted" to ensure the Jagdambika Pal government was dismissed. Advani once again seized the chance to up the ante and told reporters that Vajpayee was on a "fast unto death". So, Vajpayee was left to deal with that as best as he could. Thankfully, the impasse didn't last long and Vajpayee broke his fast.

If this is the situation now, what will happen when Vajpayee becomes Prime Minister?

> HEARD IN THE AICC OFFICE
>
> **H.D. Deve Gowda can be sure that no one will ever shoot him. How can you shoot someone who's always nodding — off?**
>
> A CONGRESSMAN

Uneasy alliance

From the noises the BJP is making about Jayalalitha and corruption, one would think that while the BJP had reluctantly befriended the Iron Butterfly, she was desperate to hang on to the BJP.

In fact, that is not the case at all. Jayalalitha has confided in party colleagues that she is feeling hemmed in by the holier than thou BJP and would like to break the relationship, except that she doesn't have a choice just yet.

She said that she had been 'blackmailed' into doing a deal with the BJP and never really wanted to. The odd thing about all this is the low key, but conspicuous presence of new friend Subramani-am Swamy, who [illegible] have been a go-between.

With former Jayalalitha supporter in the Congress, R. Venkataraman lending a solicitous hand to Vajpayee as he drinking his orange juice, you can be forgiven for not being able to tell the difference between the Congress(I) and the BJP.

A President's choice!

And while on the subject of former President R. Venkataraman, does the man's greed have no bounds?

First, he wrote a letter to Shankar Dayal Sharma, asking for a house within the compounds of Rashtrapati Bhavan. Sharma politely refused, not wanting to have his predecessor living down the road and breathing down his neck.

But being indefatigable as he is, Venkataraman then wrote another letter to the urban development ministry, asking for a house in Delhi, which he as a former President of India is entitled to.

When Venkataraman completed his term as President, he moved to Madras in the luxurious Kottoorpuram area where he has a palatial house. Security was fortified here at government expense. Now, he's changed his mind and has decided he wants to live in Delhi. The government has found a house for him. But that's not good enough. Venkataraman also says he wants the same amount of money to be spent renovating this house, as was spent on S.D. Sharma.

While S.D. Sharma's residence was in dilapidated condition and needed money, the one chosen for Venkataraman is in reasonably good condition. But R.V. wants the money — about Rs 7 lakh — spent on it any way, period.

CHECK-LIST

Poll predictions: who said what

A.C. Nielson: The world's largest market research agency said that Sonia Gandhi's campaigning would improve the chances of the Congress. Thus, the BJP & allies which was sure of securing a majority in the Lok Sabha would manage only 231 seats. The agency predicted that the Congress would corner 172, while the UF would get only 116 seats. In other words, it's going to be a hung-Parliament, yet again.

Centre for Media Studies (CMS): The survey predicted the 12th Lok Sabha polls would result in a hung-Parliament. Although, the BJP and allies would be ahead of its rivals (225-235), still it will fall short of a majority in the House. The Congress would manage between 150-155 seats and the UF around 120 to 130.

Development & Research Services (DRS): The agency said there would be a considerable vote-swing in favour of the BJP, but it will not get a majority. The BJP and combine will get 249 seats; the Congress 155; and the UF 102 seats in Parliament.

Centre for Studies of Developing Societies (CSDS): Predicted that the BJP and allies will end up with 214 seats. The Congress, aided by Sonia Gandhi's blitzkrieg, would get 184 seats. And the United Front only 129. Result: a hung-Parliament.

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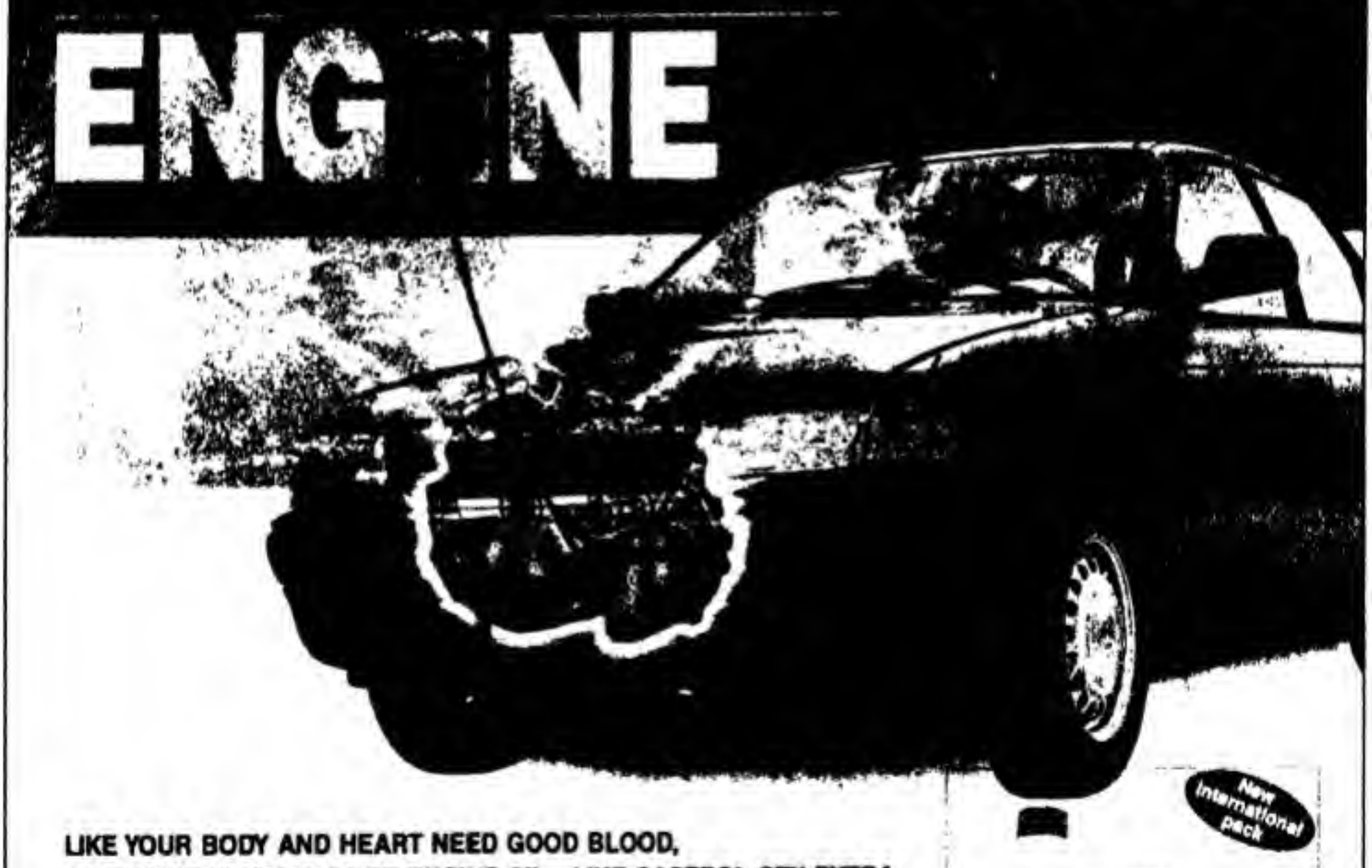

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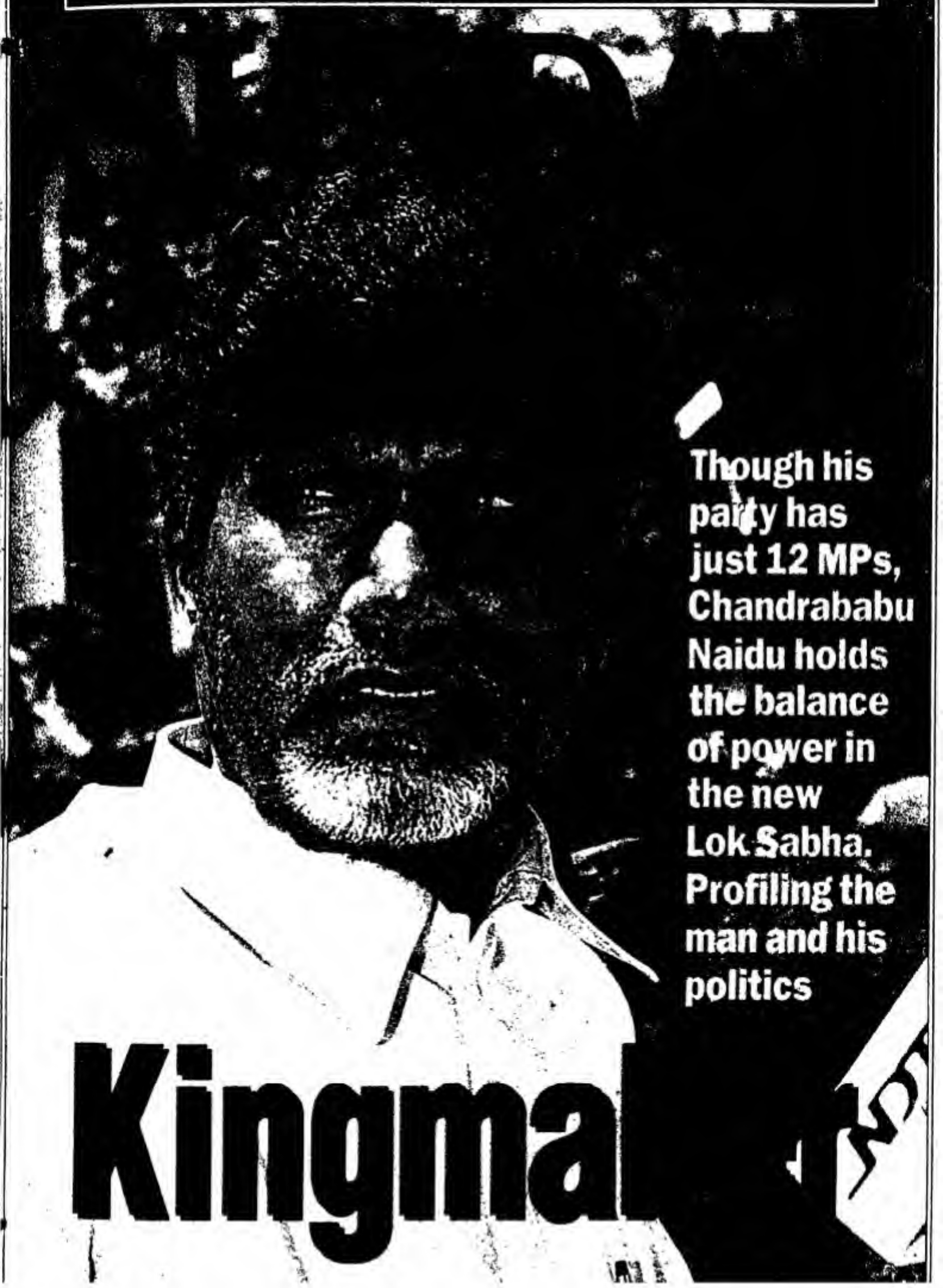

Though his party has just 12 MPs, Chandrababu Naidu holds the balance of power in the new Lok Sabha. Profiling the man and his politics

Kingmaker

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Mamata Banerjee on how she is gearing up to take on the Left Front in West Bengal

Coalition curse

Your cover story, *Make us an offer* (1 — 8 March), has rightly predicted that regional parties would play a crucial role in government formation. And though the BJP has reasons to be happy about its performance, it cannot explain away its rout in Maharashtra and Rajasthan.

Coming to power at the Centre with the help of allies can only add to the instability and uncertainties of coalition politics — you lay yourself open to blackmail. Coalition politics has been a curse for India. It has made a virtue of instability.

Swati Chakrabarty, Calcutta (West Bengal)

■ Your cover story has hit the nail on the head by saying that there would be frantic post-poll deals. With no single political party commanding absolute majority, the country is again headed for uncertainty.

India's Constitution should be written anew and the nation should go in for the presidential form of government with the states having full autonomy.

Sulekha Chaturvedi, New Delhi

Stop defections

This refers to the story *Think and vote*, (25 — 31 January). One must question the right and wisdom of M.S. Gill in denigrating political defections just before the election. In fact, the pre-poll interregnum is the right time for the change-over. But there is an urgent need to stop defections during the tenure of a government at the Centre. Didn't JMM play into the hands of the Congress for money during Rao's regime?

Dara P. Soperiwala, Pune (Maharashtra)

Hardly a moderate

Murli Manohar Joshi was one of the leaders who organised the Babri Masjid demolition (*The individual*, 11 — 17 January). It tarnished India's reputation and tagged the Hindus with the labels 'extremist' and 'bigot'. Joshi believes the key to India's success as a nation lies in its diversity. Any government — or any political party — that seeks to destroy the diversity will end up destroying India.

Joshi: espousing the one-nation theory

Yet, Joshi belongs to a party that advocates a single-culture, single- nation theory. The storm-troopers who carried out the Babri demolition were uneducated, lumpen elements and perhaps were unaware of the dangerous consequences of their actions. But it is not understandable how an educated person like Joshi subscribes to the one-nation theory. He hardly seems a 'moderate'.

P. Lal, Riyadh (Saudi Arabia)

Know the truth

In the penultimate paragraph of the story *State of turmoil* (25 — 31 January), a doubt has been raised over the links between ULFA and the Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti (MASS). To my mind, the fact-finding team wasn't objective in their investigation. Probably, the 'facts' were found before the enquiry was conducted. I live in Assam and have been watching the developments for a long time. It's impossible to overlook the links between MASS and ULFA. MASS appears to be a front organisation of ULFA and its concern for human rights is only peripheral.

If we have to accept MASS as a human rights organisation, we have to restrict our definition of 'human' to ULFA activists only. If we are concerned with human rights, then let us (including the MASS) condemn all those who are violating human rights. The MASS hasn't done it so far, perhaps because they feel the terrorist outfit is a philanthropic organisation.

K. Balagopal and his team are doing a disservice to the cause of human rights by lending legitimacy to inhuman

UF leaders at a meeting: fleeting partners

wrongs. They should have contacted journalists, professionals and other intellectuals who are neither government agents nor connected with MASS to know the truth.

B. Das, Barpeta (Assam)

Decline and fall

This refers to the story, *The CPI(M) is willing...* (4 — 10 January). In India, communist ideology was established and propagated by the intelligentsia after World War II. It was never understood and backed by the agrarian or worker class (due to the feudal structure of the society), contrary to communist movements in other parts of the world. There was never a class war to ascertain rights on an ideological plane. The Telengana movement or the Santhal uprising were more against local exploitation.

Disillusionment among the educated class in the wake of the split in the Communist Party in the Sixties caused the movement to lose its way. Since then, the communist movement in India was just about negative politics. The party could not offer any viable alternative to alleviate the suffering of the common man.

When Communist movements in Russia, Italy, France and China are adapting fast to the times, India's communist leaders have failed to rise to the occasion. They only take pride in playing kingmakers!

R. Mitra, Pune (Maharashtra)

No caste motive

I wonder how Inder Malhotra in his column headlined *Foul Play* (18 — 24 January) comments that Mayawati removed T.S.R. Subramaniam from the post of chief secretary just because he was a Brahmin. This is highly objectionable. Does the columnist have proof?

I admit Subramaniam is a capable officer. But every government has its prerogative for appointing a chief secretary of its choice. And Mayawati might have just followed that. To attribute caste motive on that is wrong and motivated. It exposes the writer's frame of mind.

S. Dutt, Allahabad (Uttar Pradesh)

Pilots first

This refers to the story *Thanks to Sareen...* (11 — 17 January). While projecting the grievances of the engineers, the author has conveniently omitted to highlight the grave risks that Air Force pilots are exposed to.

I would like to mention that I was among the 45 fliers who joined the IAF in 1963. Out of these 45, only 15 fliers, including me, have survived. These figures in themselves are indicative of the inherent high risks.

Another aspect that hurts the pride of the IAF as a fighting force is that the author has chosen to target the chief of the air staff for the recent incidents of indiscipline, but he doesn't seem to know that the Air Chief himself had brought the engineers' pay disparities to the knowledge of the Central government.

Indian Air Force: flying high

Before making any comments against the head of the IAF, the author could have ascertained the ground realities. Discipline and obedience are two most important factors in the armed forces which have a bearing on the operational efficiency of the air force. Viewed in this background, even a layman would not approve of the irresponsible manner in which some misguided engineers in the IAF conducted themselves by way of protests and demonstrations.

It's true that the media has a responsibility to inform and educate the masses, but in doing so it must guard against supporting the elements responsible for indiscipline in the armed forces.

Wg Cdr B.K. Attri (retd), Gurgaon (Haryana)

No poll-star

The story *Star Watch* (22 28 February) missed out N.T. Rama Rao. The matinee idol and MGR's counterpart who reigned the Telugu filmdom for decades was a force to reckon with in Andhra Pradesh. With Rajkumar and Anant Nag joining the fray from Karnataka, the trend of film stars venturing into politics seems quite commonplace in the south.

But the scenario in Kerala is different. People of Kerala are politically conscious and even the most ardent cine buff is averse to the idea of his favourite film star joining politics. For instance, Prem Nazir, who has a huge fan following failed to get elected in the state Assembly. Film stars in Kerala are aware that mere histrionics will not do in politics and are thus keeping themselves away from the political scene.

Nalini Sudhakaran, Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala)

MILESTONES

ISSUED: [illegible] a non-bailable warrant against P.V. Prabhakar Rao, son of [illegible] Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, for his alleged involvement in the urea scam. Prabhakar Rao was evading summons from the Enforcement Directorate.

AWARDED: to West Bengal power minister Shankar Sen, the Central Board of Irrigation and Power golden jubilee award, on 5 March. Sen later donated the cash award to a cancer research project.

SWORN IN: BJP leader Keshubhai Patel, as chief

[illegible] of Gujarat, on 4 [illegible], by Governor [illegible] Singh. The [illegible] won an absolute [illegible] in the state.

[illegible] Somen [illegible] Congress leader, [illegible] the post of the [illegible] of the West [illegible] Pradesh [illegible] Committee, on [illegible], accepting moral [illegible] for his [illegible] poll [illegible] the state.

[illegible] Suresh [illegible] director, [illegible] Oil [illegible] head of [illegible]

SIGHT & SOUND

SUDHIR TAILANG/THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

■ There are two views in the party. One view is that we should not be anxious to form a government. The other view is that we should not allow the BJP to form a government.

V.N. GADGIL, *Congress spokesman, conceding that there was a division in the party ranks on the question of forming a government at the Centre*

■ Just because some parties have fallen, it should not be taken that they have gone to sleep.

H.D. DEVE GOWDA, *Janata Dal leader, after his party's dismal performance in the Lok Sabha elections*

■ Only we have the mandate of forming the government...we will be able to prove majority.

SUSHMA SWARAJ, *BJP general secretary, briefing newsmen in New Delhi*

■ It was blind anti-Congressism that has led us twice in the past into the arms of the BJP. Now, blind anti-BJPism can lead us to condoning all the wrong-doings of the Congress. And in the process, it is the third force that gets hit.

V.P. SINGH, *former Prime Minister*

■ We are not interested in power. We want to improve the lot of the people.

MAMATA BANERJEE, *Trinamul Congress leader, announcing that her party will support a BJP government at the Centre from outside*

■ At this point in my career, a boyfriend would be a burden.

MAHIMA CHAUDHURY, *film actress*

SEEN

BORN TO FLOWER

A new parliamentary party takes off

PRADIP SARKAR

HOUR OF RECKONING: *Mamata Banerjee with her MPs*

A one-storeyed tenement at the end of a narrow lane. A noisy, emotional crowd waited outside, smiling and jubilant, hugging each other, celebrating...what? Victory, success, birth, or all of them?

Well, all of them. And all because of a woman A plain, unattractive woman in her early forties who had formed her own political party, fought the elections with a new symbol — twin flowers on a tuft of grass — challenging the fancied Left, and the Congress that had spited her. And she won, not one, not two, not even three, but seven seats.

The sky was green with *abir* and a band played popular Hindi numbers. "Mamata Banerjee *zindabad*," the crowd shouted — one voice, one sound, amid the fragrance of flowers. 4 March, 1998. Banerjee was holding her first party-meeting with her MPs to decide on a political course for the nascent Trinamul Congress formed only 56 days back. All the six other MPs — Ajit Panja, Sudip Bandyopadhyay, Akbar Ali Khondekar, Bikram Sarkar, Ranjit Panja and Krishna Bose — were already there.

They came in, one by one. The crowd greeted them but their eyes were riveted on the small door — from where their most favourite mascot, Mamata Banerjee, would emerge.

Two pandals had been erected on the courtyard. One was to hold the meeting of the MPs, and the other for the press conference after the deliberations. For a party that was to send seven MPs to Parliament, the ambience was in stark contrast to the HQ of other parties.

Sitting inside the small office room which barely accommodates six people, the MPs greeted each other. After days of gruelling campaign, it was time to savour the moment. It hadn't been easy. Politics is all about opposition, but when that opposition turns violent, when you have to contend with thugs, things become different. Now all that was past.

Enter Mamata Banerjee. Cracker-bursts rent the air as whirring shutters synchronised with the rapid blink of camera lenses. Reporters jostled with each other — a closer look, a quote, anything newsy that would make a good headline. Mamata didn't reply She pushed through the crowd, towards the pandals where she was to hold the meeting. The six MPs had left the office room and had joined Mamata outside the pandal. With a smile on her face, she turned. "I am no longer alone. I have six MPs with me. Now, those people in Delhi will have to give us a separate room in Parliament." Then she went into the makeshift, hastily-erected conference chamber.

The scribes waited outside as Mamata and her victorious six huddled around the wooden table inside the pandal. It took just ten minutes to pass the resolution. Then they emerged, smiling. Mamata Banerjee was elected the leader of the Trinamul Congress Parliamentary Party and Ajit Panja, its chief whip. A new parliamentary party was born. •

Arindam Sarkar/Calcutta

"I'm no longer alone. I have six MPs with me. Now, those in Delhi will have to give us a separate room in Parliament"

In attack mode

A BJP government at the Centre will showcase **Mulayam Singh Yadav's** *unique talents*

Behind every prime ministerial candidate there seems to be an old-man-in-a-hurry. Particularly in the case of Mulayam Singh Yadav. Not for nothing was the cherubic visage of the Samajwadi Party general secretary, Amar Singh, bursting out of television screens. "Comrade Harkishen Singh Surjeet has already said that the CPI(M) supports the SP's stand that the BJP must not be allowed to form the government. So we will do whatever the CPI(M) tells us," said Singh, presumably standing in for Mulayam.

Yadav, never one to shirk responsibility, is too 'polite' to say no. So much so that he sees no room for ifs and buts when it comes to becoming Prime Minister. At a recent press conference when asked, "*Yadi aapko Congress support karti hai prime ministership ke liye*...(What if the Congress is willing to back you as the Prime Minister)," he replied: "*Aare bhai, yadi kyon lagate hain* (Why do you say if)?" he laughed cockily.

Surjeet considers him a better Prime Minister than Jyoti Basu, a member of his own party. The Congress concedes secretly that if it had gone along with Yadav and reached an understanding on seats in UP, it probably would not have had to see the party scoring nil in the state. Yadav holds all the secular trumps in his hands.

What makes this man tick?

He's come a long way from UP. His eyes are on Delhi. And his formula is clear: 'Lead, follow, or get out of the way'.

Yadav had taken a calculated risk by accepting a Cabinet portfolio last time. The evolution — from being a regional leader to a national statesman — was a painful process but Mulayam did not give up.

His election campaign in Sambhal made the agenda plain. He was not just the saviour of minorities in Uttar Pradesh, he was the future Prime Minister. "*Aap ka saubhagya hai ki desh ka bhavi pardhan mantri Sambhal se chunav lar rahen hain*," screamed a party worker.

His career is a textbook study of how a regional leader can dream of being a national one, if he doesn't get derailed by the political distractions on the way.

In fact, Mulayam dreams of being a subcontinental leader, not just an Indian Prime Minister.

"Pakistan, Bangladesh and India were part of a subcontinent which has an identity of language, history and culture. We share a past of fighting imperialism. What better way to challenge the world than to knit ourselves together in a confederation?" he said at a seminar during his defence ministership, gladdening the hearts of the Left internationalists, but making the Indian Army chief wonder what he was doing there.

He followed this up by creating a new punchline for his speeches during the election campaign. While other politicians would simply say, "*Jai Hind*,"

Yadav's signature — and manifesto — was much longer. You knew he was ending his speech when he began saying, "*Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan, Jai Ramzan.*"

For Yadav, this was not just one of the things politicians said for effect. He is convinced that a pan-Asian appeal to Muslims is the only way of keeping South Asia intact. He just regrets that the Congress doesn't see things the same way.

Otherwise, it would have been logical for the Congress to have done things his way in the elections, tied up with the Samajwadi Party in a *true* alliance (as Sharad Pawar did in Maharashtra to devastating effect for the BJP) and swept UP.

DHEERAJ DHAWAN

"Comrade Harkishen Singh Surjeet has already said that the CPI(M) supports the SP's stand that the BJP must not be allowed to form the government," said SP general secretary Amar Singh, standing in for Mulayam Singh Yadav (far left)

However, today, because that didn't happen, Yadav has got just 20 seats in the Lok Sabha. "How can I be PM, the mandate is not in our favour," he says. "*Secular forces mein Congress single-largest party hai, unhi ko apna leader chunna chahiye* (Congress is the single-largest party among the secular forces, it should elect its own leader)," he adds.

Mulayam for once seems to be thinking long-term. The infighting within the Congress is no secret. Pawar could be in the running for prime ministership but the Sonia Gandhi lobby seems to be nervous about that. Chandrababu Naidu, the United Front convener, has already branded the Congress its enemy number one in Andhra Pradesh. Mulayam realises it is best to be magnanimous. "*Rajneeti mein jiski sankhya zyada hoti hai, usi ki takat bhi zyada hoti hai* (In politics the one who has more numbers is stronger)." "*Hum apni aukat ko samajhte hain* (We are aware of our station in life)," he says.

Mulayam's supporters argue that for those interested in a secular government have no other option than to support him. Within the United Front, Inder Kumar Gujral has already lost his secular credentials by tying up with the Akalis. H.D. Deve Gowda has become irrelevant, left without numbers and support from the front. And G.K. Moopanar's poor performance in Tamil Nadu has obviously left Mulayam pleased.

The only fly in the ointment is the other Yadav. If it was Laloo Prasad Yadav who foiled Mulayam's chances of becoming PM last time, there will be others who will be willing to join hands with the former Bihar chief minister this time as well.

Even that Mulayam can handle. What he can't is the one person in Indian politics he fears and loathes, because he's much smarter than Mulayam. That's V P. Singh, the Chanakya of United Front politics. Given the present configuration of power in the Congress and the United Front, if VP supports Pawar and urges the UF to do a deal with him, Mulayam could find himself out in the cold yet again.

At the moment, Mulayam is like a caterpillar trying to turn himself into an unlikely butterfly with the help of the Left parties. If Harkishen Singh Surjeet stands by him, Jyoti Basu could have a rival in Mulayam Singh Yadav. •

Anuja Pande/New Delhi

RAJIV SHUKLA

Party's over?

The Lok Sabha results show that the BSP is all but routed in Uttar Pradesh

UP Assembly Speaker Kesri Nath Tripathi is not likely to disqualify the 17 Bahujan Samaj Party MLAs who deserted Mayawati to join hands with Kalyan Singh. He is expected to go by the argument of the leader of the Jantantrik BSP (rebel group) that at the time of split there were 23 MLAs before Mayawati whisked away 11 of them. Later five MLAs managed to escape from her clutches bringing the number to 17. So, he has urged the Speaker to consider this case as a split within a split and that nobody should be disqualified.

Sources confirmed that the Speaker is going to accept the theory that originally 23 members (required one-third strength) had left the BSP, 11 of them were forcibly taken back and out of them, five rejoined the rebel group. In this situation, the Speaker can go by the original number and may not disqualify these 17 MLAs.

Mayawati, it is learnt, has already knocked the doors of the court and sought action against them. She has also alleged in her writ petition that the Speaker has not been behaving fairly. Though Mayawati has not submitted enough evidence in support of her contention so far, it seems that the court is not going to direct the Speaker on the nature of his judgement. As of now, the court has only asked the Speaker to dispose of the case as quickly as possible, without fixing any deadline.

According to anti-defection law, the Speaker enjoys enormous powers and his verdict in all probability is likely to be final. People may challenge his verdict in court, but the court will take too long to give the final judgement. Meanwhile, according to the Speaker's office, the hearing of the case is yet to be over as it will take some more time.

In this situation, an early verdict is not feasible. Though Tripathi, a leading lawyer of Allahabad High Court, will be keeping the legal aspects in mind before delivering the judgement, Mayawati may move the Supreme Court to see a quick disposal of the case.

The drubbing in the Lok Sabha polls has further demoralised Mayawati and Kanshi Ram. This time the BSP could get only five seats in the country despite having alliances in Punjab, Haryana and Bihar. The people have rejected the party in all the three states.

And in Uttar Pradesh, where it was expecting around 20 seats, it had to be satisfied with just four seats. Moreover, while BSP supremo Kanshi Ram lost heavily from Saharanpur, Mayawati won from Akbarpur, a much safer seat.

The recent Lok Sabha results indicate that had Mulayam Singh Yadav gone with the Congress, he would have got more seats. The break-up of the votes clearly shows that in 35 seats the Samajwadi Party and the Congress have together polled more than that of the BJP.

Everybody knows that Mayawati and Mulayam can never get along. They may come together again as allies in future to keep the BJP at bay, but that will not last. In this situation, Mulayam should forget Mayawati and the BSP and, instead, join hands with the Congress.

I strongly believe that when Sonia has come out, the Congress and the SP together will make a formidable combination in UP and might even win the next Assembly election easily. •

Kanshi Ram and Mayawati: time for introspection

The drubbing in the Lok Sabha polls has demoralised the BSP. In UP, where it expected around 20 seats, it could win just four. And, while Mayawati won from Akbarpur, Kanshi Ram lost from Saharanpur

INDER MALHOTRA

International relations

I.K. Gujral's book deals with the imperatives of Indian foreign policy

Foreign policy and international affairs have been far away from most people's minds during the hotly-contested elections which, unfortunately, have produced only confusion and uncertainty. Before the avalanche of election results started coming, there was a charming function at Rashtrapati Bhavan at which Inder Kumar Gujral's book, *A Foreign Policy For India*, was released. About the thought-provoking contents of the book, superbly produced by the external publicity division of the ministry of external affairs, I will write at greater length later. For the present, I just want to make a few preliminary points.

The first of these is about the timing of the book's release. It coincided with not merely the last phases of voting across the country but also with the shameful political crisis in UP created by unscrupulous politicians and a palpably partisan Governor. Although on Romesh Bhandari's reprehensible behaviour, the President and the PM did not see eye to eye, the Rashtrapati Bhavan get-together amply demonstrated that differences of opinion had not affected the personal cordiality and mutual respect between Narayanan and Gujral.

That, of course, is incidental. The material point about Gujral's book is that it would be a great mistake to dismiss it as one of those collections of speeches in which this country abounds. Though undoubtedly built around speeches delivered by Gujral, first as foreign minister and then as both Prime Minister and foreign minister, it is, in fact, a cogent and comprehensive articulation of the imperatives of Indian foreign policy in the post-Cold War world now about to enter the new millennium.

Those who have edited, designed and produced the book have been wise to let thematic coherence override chronology. They also have been selective in their approach and have not yielded to the temptation of including every word uttered by The Boss. Above all, they have been careful not to overlook the linkages between diplomacy, security, economy, technology and so on. Not since H.Y. Sharada Prasad edited foreign policy speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru in the Sixties has anything like Gujral's foreign policy prescription appeared.

A cursory look at the book reveals a distinct Nehruvian touch. Immediately after becoming foreign minister, Gujral had removed all the earlier decorations on his office walls and replaced them by a single portrait — that of Nehru painted by Gujral's younger brother, Satish. The message was loud and clear. At the same time, Gujral was determined to take imaginative initiatives, but the change was to be within the broader framework of continuity.

Among the more important initiatives taken by him was what has come to be known as the Gujral doctrine on relations with smaller neighbours. In the book, the references to this doctrine are relatively few and rather diffident. But the doctrine has done a lot of good and is in the larger and long-term national interest. Having been present at the creation — during foreign minister Gujral's visit to Dhaka in September 1996 — let me delineate just one vignette.

The pathology of Bangladesh's domestic politics is such that even the best of Indian moves is viewed there with deep suspicion. The Bangladeshi media were therefore highly sceptical when Gujral announced that a treaty on the sharing of Ganga waters was no longer linked to transit rights across Bangladesh to the sensitive north-eastern region.

"But you will ask for transit rights separately?" asked some Dhaka journalists. "No, I will not," replied Gujral. "Ah," persisted the mediapersons, "you are giving up this demand." Gujral replied: "No, I am not. I am leaving it to Bangladesh to decide whether to give India these rights is or isn't in its own best interest." •

V RAJAGOPAL

A cursory look at *A Foreign Policy For India* reveals a distinct Nehruvian touch. While Gujral has taken imaginative initiatives, the change has been within the broader framework of continuity

"People of this state

Mamata Banerjee on how the Trinamul is gearing itself to take on the Left Front in West Bengal

INTERVIEWED BY ARINDAM SARKAR/CALCUTTA

Tiredness was written all over her face. TV crews were running after her, photographers were clicking away merrily and her supporters wanted to touch her. Mamata Banerjee, MP and Trinamul Congress supremo, was craving for a breathing space. While analysts were still discussing all sorts of permutations and combinations at the Centre, Banerjee gave an exclusive interview as she sped from one studio to another for TV and radio sessions. Excerpts:

SUNDAY: Now that you are not restrained by the Congress, what is your strategy vis-a-vis the Left Front in West Bengal?

Mamata Banerjee: It is wrong to say that I was restrained by the Congress. Of course, there were certain compulsions when I was a Congress worker. Now, the Congress has been exposed. People have understood the relationship it shares with the Left Front and they have shown their disenchantment through the ballot.

We have the support of the people and we will continue our fight. When we went to the polls, the Trinamul Congress was not in power. We fought against the establishment. What's more, even the Congress worked hand in glove with the CPI(M). And it not only expelled us, but also abused and attacked our partymen at every pretext. This is no political ethics.

Q: What about the plans for future battles that will begin with the panchayat polls?

A: Why should I disclose my strategy. But I can tell you that from now on there is going to be a *tremendous* change in the social, political and economic scenario of West Bengal. People of this state have had enough and they want an alternative government. And we will provide what the people desire.

Q: What are the specific issues you are going to fight for?

A: *Bangla Bachao*, period. We want the emancipation of the people of West Bengal from the draconian hands of the Left. So, we are going to concentrate on the deteriorating law and order situation, politicisation of the administration, corruption, financial irregularities, lack of industrialisation and development. This government is doing all sorts of misdeeds and Trinamul will expose them all.

Q: Will the people support you against the Left?

A: Look, the people have given a befitting reply in the polls. Our party, which is 56-day old, has won seven seats. In fact, out of the 29 seats that we contested, we would have won 23 had the government not rigged the polls. The moment the administration came to know about the trends, they started rigging at the counting tables. Still we have created history.

Q: Now that Somen Mitra has resigned from the PCC presidentship, will you accept the post?

A: We have our own political party. I'm not interested in joining the Congress.I am totally dedicated to the Trinamul Congress, its workers and its supporters.

Q: But what if Sonia Gandhi personally requests you to return to the Congress?

A: There is no question of personal requests now. I had taken all the abuses and humiliations hurled at me by Congressmen just because Sonia had asked me to wait. But after being expelled from the party, it's all over. In fact, nobody

want an alternative"

PRADIP SANYAL

"We will continue our fight. We have the support of the people. When we went to the polls, the Trinamul Congress was not in power. We fought against the establishment"

from the Congress even bothered to talk to me. So why now?

We respect the Rajiv Gandhi family. I listened to Sonia as long as she was not in politics. But that is past now. Today, the scenario is different. I have respect for the family but I don't do politics by selling the pictures of Rajiv and Indira Gandhi.

And my loyalty can be proved by the fact that after the formation of Parliament, I will bring a motion to discuss the Jain Commission report. We — Rajiv loyalists — want to know who killed him?

Q: Are you scared that if you return to the Congress you will lose the support of the people?
A: What do you mean 'scared'. We are the creation of the people. People have given the verdict. And we cannot deny that. In fact, in spite of forming a new party, people returned me to Parliament by a margin of 2,24,000 votes. It's no joke. I have done a hat-trick, a feat never performed before in Calcutta South seat. How can I let down all those who have voted for us for having no links with the opportunistic Congress.

Q: Panchayat polls are due this year. Is your fledgling party prepared to take on the Left in the rural areas?
A: Of course. Didn't you see our performance in the Lok Sabha polls. We have two MPs — Ranjit Panja and Akbar Ali Khandekar — from rural areas. I polled more than 35,000 votes from Sonarpur which is a rural belt. Moreover, the Trinamul came second in most of the constituencies in rural areas. Now, what makes you think that my party cannot take on the Left in the rural belt?

This time, the Left, taking advantage of the fact that I was concentrating in my own constituency, managed to rig the polls. In fact, they tried all sorts of manipulations to defeat us. But let the panchayat and Assembly polls come, I will show them. Because by then, I will be totally free and personally oversee the polls.

Q: The polling pattern clearly shows that people in the urban areas voted for the Trinamul more than those from the rural areas. So, what makes you confident that your party will get the rural votes in the panchayat?
A: True. People were not allowed to vote freely for our party. The government freely rigged in the rural areas.

Q: How can you stop this in the future?
A: (*Smiles*) That's secret. We are working on it. The Left Front government will be shocked when they see us working during the panchayat polls. And take it from me, the Left will not be able to manipulate anything. I will be watching like a hawk.

Q: What are the key issues you are going to raise in the panchayat polls?
A: We will highlight the defalcation of funds from developmental programmes, deprivations of the poor people and the reign of terror prevailing in the rural areas. This government should realise that in the name of panchayat it cannot torture the people of the state.

We would force this government to provide basic amenities like water, housing and better roads. We will force the administration to restore the people's fundamental, democratic and economic rights.

We know that people from the rural areas are being driven out of their lands by this government who is trying to

V RAJAGOPAL

D.P SINHA

"There's no question of personal requests now. I was abused and humiliated by Congressmen just because Sonia had asked me to wait"

grab lands for industrialisation. This has to be stopped. We will see to it that there is a complete development in the lifestyle of the rural people. It is high time that the Left Front had a strong opposition in the state.

Q: But it has been seen that everytime you start an agitation it boils down to the failure of law and order situation. Given your future projections, there will be a lot of *hungama* in West Bengal.

A: Yes, if the government tries to scuttle our movements there will be trouble. After all, our basic aim is to restore the control of villages, forests, rivers and lands to the hands of the people who reside there. And not allow these to be controlled by *dadas* who take orders from leaders in Calcutta. Believe me, people of West Bengal are with me in this agitation. Just wait and see.

Q: What is your stand vis-a-vis the BJP?

A: We have decided to support the BJP from outside. We have not been approached by the BJP for support. And this decision is largely to do with the general feeling prevailing among the people. They want an alternative government at the Centre. We have just responded to the pulse of the people.

We only want a stable government which will benefit the people. My experience has shown that if there is a Congress-United Front government, it will collapse once again.

Moreover, our support is conditional. We want the BJP to take stringent action in the Wakf scandal, PL scam, the divergence of funds from the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana and other rural development programmes, etc.

Q: So will a BJP-led government at the Centre help you in your anti-Left struggle?

A: Yes. If they don't, we will chalk our own strategy. Look, if we get help, it's good for the people. If we don't, the Trinamul is enough to check these malpractices.

Q: Won't a formal tie-up with the BJP affect your Muslim votes?

A: This is absolutely a wrong idea. Look, we never played the communal card during our campaign. It is the CPI(M) and the Congress who tried to drive a wedge between Hindus and Muslims. The Trinamul doesn't believe in either secularism or communalism. It only believes in humanism. Moreover, I have always stood by this community in their hour of need, they too will never leave me.

Regarding the uniform civil code, there can be no decision without a consensus. And regarding Article 370, I don't want to comment because I'm not from Jammu and Kashmir.

Q: Don't you think that the BJP is using you to make inroads in West Bengal?

A: True, the BJP is a national party. But remember we are a self-sufficient outfit and the BJP should also know that we don't need to ride piggyback to secure votes for us.

Q: Finally, what is the Trinamul's ultimate goal in West Bengal?

A: The Trinamul Congress is a newborn baby. It's a healthy baby and doesn't need Farex to gain weight. And within 56 days it has shown tremendous result in spite of all odds. This baby has already started running and after six months you will see how well it performs in the examinations. After all, people love this baby, they will take care of it. And the baby's target is to capture the Writers' Buildings within six months. •

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KINGMAKER

Though his party has just 12 MPs, Chandrababu Naidu holds the balance of power in the new Lok Sabha. Profiling the man and his politics

"If we go with the BJP, we lose the minority vote, our Left allies and we do a *volte-face* on our policies. If we go with any Congress-led alliance, we are finished in the state. Either way, we eat crow."

Renuka Chowdhury articulated the Telugu Desam Party's problem remarkably succinctly as the party agonised over the role it would play in the formation of the next government. TDP president and Andhra Pradesh chief minister Chandrababu Naidu has 12 MPs in hand. The BJP desperately needs that number for a simple majority. The United Front — largely in the form of the Left Front and Mulayam Singh Yadav — wants him to keep the secular banner flying and vote against the BJP.

Naidu holds that balance of power in his hands. And, for once, he does not cherish it.

Indira Gandhi

"Don't bother with him [Rama Rao]. Film actors vanish after one box-office hit"

N.T. Rama Rao

"The Centre is a myth. Real power lies in the states"

The formal epitaph for the National Front was written when NTR died in 1996, still its chairman, and Chandrababu Naidu refused to be a part of it. The constituents went to polls on their own in 1996 and, in most states, fought against each other

Mix And Match

The TDP has been playing an [illegible] role in coalition politics

In 1983, when Indira Gandhi heard at a party meeting in Hyderabad that a film actor called N.T. Rama Rao was floating a party called the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), she told her party workers: "Don't bother with him. Film actors vanish after one box-office hit."

Much to her chagrin, Rama Rao didn't vanish. Instead, he swept the Assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh and actually became chief minister. Furthermore, after her assassination in 1984, when the rest of the country gave Rajiv Gandhi a resounding mandate in Parliament and wiped out the rest of the Opposition, this little-known actor hung on. The TDP, with 31 MPs, became the largest Opposition party in Parliament.

And that, really, was the beginning of the Third Force.

Rama Rao understood what the BJP took a few more years to grasp: emotion works where reason can't. He had been swept to power on an emotional 'Telugu pride' campaign and that streak of megalomania immediately led him farther afield. He called on all regional parties and promised them that if they got together, they could oust the Congress from Delhi. "The Centre is a myth," he said. Real power lies in the states.

Initially, they came out of curiosity, out of work that they were, with no MPs in Parliament. The first annual convention of the TDP at Vijayawada, called the Mahanadu, was held on — what else? — NTR's birthday. It was attended by the then Janata Party, Farooq Abdullah's National Conference, the DMK, the Cong(O), the CPI and CPI(M), and the BJP. Next year, when Indira Gandhi made an attempt to oust him and failed (the infamous N. Bhaskar Rao episode), the Opposition was impressed. And they attended the subsequent Mahanadus in 1984 and 1985 with more than mere curiosity. So, finally, when elections were declared in 1988, the National Front emerged as a logical anti-Congress alternative with NTR as its chairman.

When the Front came to power in 1989, there came the added problems. Rao would have liked to be Prime Minister except that the TDP was wiped out in the polls. He was peeved. Then the constant squabbles between its constituents and between V.P. Singh and Devi Lal had him running to Delhi, which irritated him. Exasperated, he held a press conference during the height of a crisis. "The National Front is nothing but a Notional Front." Finally, the government fell on the Babri Masjid issue (the BJP withdrew support).

The formal epitaph for the National Front was written when NTR died in 1996, still its chairman, and Chandrababu Naidu refused to be a part of it. He had always looked at the National Front with disdain and saw no reason to [illegible] the [illegible]. The constituents went to polls on their own in 1996 and, in most states, fought against each other.

It [illegible] new called the United Front. The [illegible] was [illegible] party getting [illegible] regional parties [illegible] During the [illegible] [illegible] Of the [illegible] actually the [illegible] National Front was [illegible]

[illegible] Third Force. [illegible]

Naidu at the wedding reception of P. Chidamberam's son: how important is the UF for him?

A third option has emerged: abstain from voting in the confidence motion altogether. This will benefit the BJP by default and yet not make Babu look like he has crossed over to the saffron brigade. While this looks like the most decent way out for the TDP, it also has its problems. Says Chowdhury: "In the next elections, the Muslims will tell us we helped form a BJP government. You can't fool them, you know. Besides, the BJP now has 20 per cent of the vote in Andhra Pradesh. How do we contain them if we help them form the government?"

It is not an easy choice. And Naidu avoided making it for as long as he could. As the final poll results poured in and the TDP's dilemma emerged on 2 March, Naidu switched off his cellphone, locked the gates of his Jubilee Hills residence and told his safari-suited guards not to let any press people in. So when the press did land up later in the day, they were told: "We have orders to keep you all off till the CM decides to meet you."

Naidu would have loved to give that stony silence treatment to the UF and the BJP too. But the CPM's Harkishen Singh Surjeet inevitably shot his mouth off early in the day when he announced that the UF would support a Congress-led government at the Centre. Before Comrade Surjeet could issue any more statements on his behalf, an angry

Renuka Chowdhury: "The BJP now has 20 per cent of the vote in Andhra. How do we contain them if we help them form the government?"

"The Congress is my main enemy in the state and the BJP is the UF's enemy at the Centre" — Naidu

In the 1977 elections, the BJP contested 41 Lok Sabha seats in Andhra Pradesh. It won just one, but it polled over nine per cent of popular vote

Eye On Andhra

The BJP's experiences in the state

The BJP struggled for two decades before it won its first seat in Andhra Pradesh. And even then, circumstances had to conspire in its favour. It was 1977, the first elections after Emergency. An anti-Congress wave was sweeping across the country and the BJP was riding on Charan Singh's shoulders. The combine contested in 37 of the 42 Lok Sabha constituencies in the state. Together, they bagged one seat.

Since then, it has been a ding-dong battle. In 1984, it again won this seat, and again with help — this time from the TDP. But it was a significant victory in so far as the opposition was significant. This was when P.V. Narasimha Rao lost his seat at Hanamkonda and almost decided to retire from politics.

The BJP lost Hanamkonda in 1989 but won the Secunderabad seat in 1991. That was the first really significant performance when — riding on the Ayodhya hysteria — the BJP contested 41 Lok Sabha seats on its own. It won just one, but it polled a little over nine per cent of the popular vote. Three decades of trying had finally brought some dividends.

In the aftermath of the demolition, their vote

"Naidu is sending feelers to us [the BJP]. He needs to join up. We don't" —

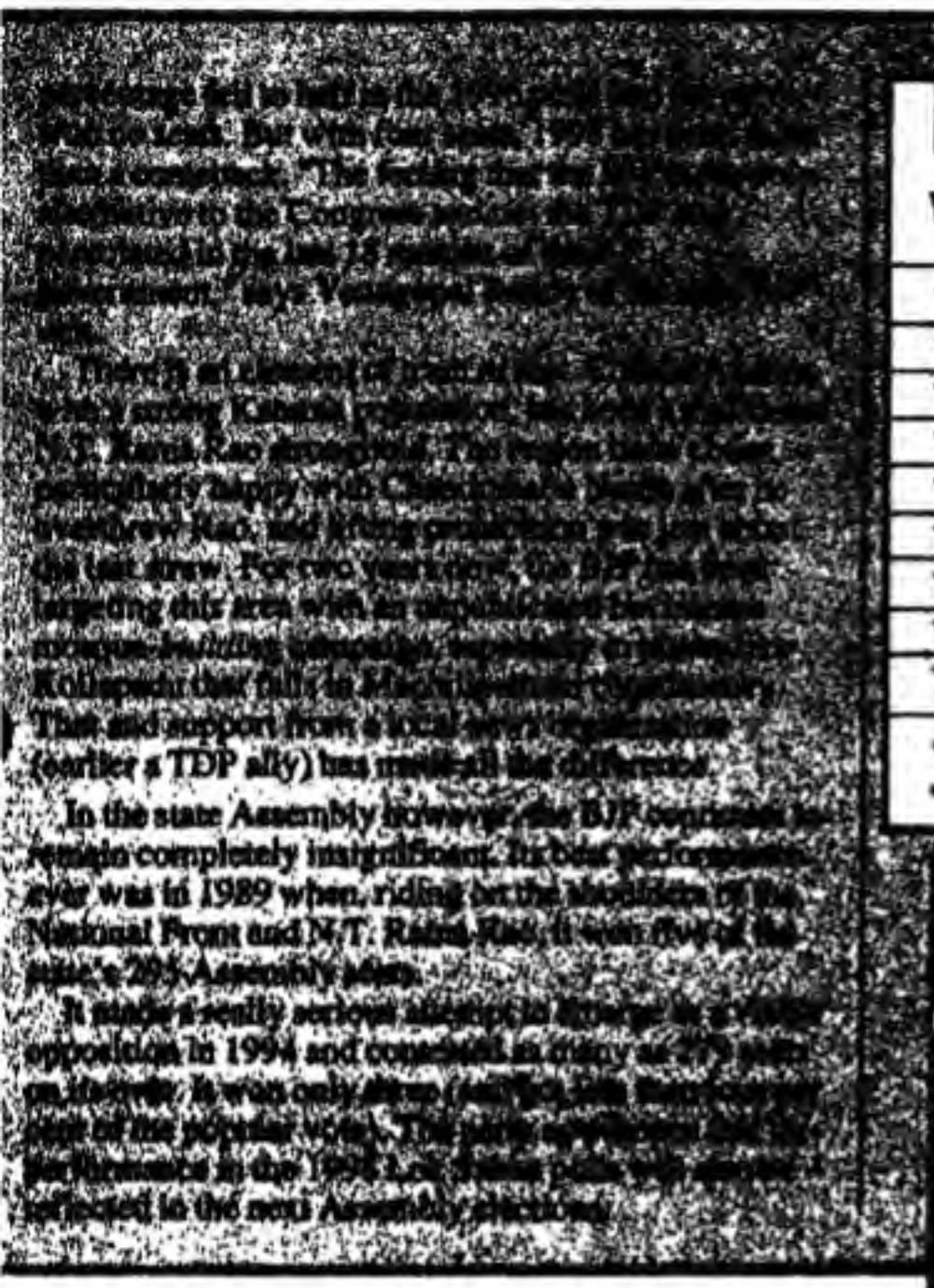
Naidu was forced to call a press conference on the evening of 3 March. He gave out a terse statement: "The Congress is my main enemy in the state and the BJP is the UF's enemy at the Centre."

Naidu's problem with supporting a Congress-led coalition is obvious. The Congress is his principal Opposition in Andhra Pradesh and while it might be okay to 'accept' Congress support at the Centre, it would be political harakiri to extend support to or participate in a Congress government. Besides, the TDP faces a more fundamental metaphysical problem: the party was born on an anti-Congress ideology. To give that up would be to give up the very reason for its existence.

What Naidu is really faced with is the problem of a relationship with the BJP. Should he support them or, at best, not oppose them as part of a short-term strategy?

What some constituents of the United Front have refused to recognise for a long time is that this decision will be based on how Naidu deals with his own problems — both political and personal. The first, of course, is how to keep his own party together after the drubbing in these elections. The second question he needs to answer is how important is the United Front for him. And, lastly, what his best long-term method of dealing with the BJP is.

Right now, there is much unhappiness in the TDP. This



POLL WATCH

YEAR	SEATS CONTESTED	SEATS WON	VOTES POLLED
1957	1	0	0.1 %
1962	8	0	1.2 %
1967	6	0	1.4 %
1971	5	0	1.6 %
1977	37	1	32.3 %
1980	-	-	-
1984	2	1	2.2 %
1991	41	1	9.6 %
1996	39	0	5.65 %

* *In 1996, the party forfeited deposits in 34 constituencies*
* *1977: with Charan Singh's BLD*

ggubati V. Rao

is the second election Naidu is facing after overthrowing his father-in-law N.T. Rama Rao in 1995. Though he decisively proved he was heir to Rama Rao's political legacy in 1996, he has lost a great deal of ground — from 17 to 12 MPs this time. "And that too," says a senior leader, "because of state-of-the-art rigging. Otherwise, the exit polls were right. We might not have got more than 4 or 5 seats."

In the meantime, not only has the Congress fared better, the BJP has also made significant gains with 4 Lok Sabha seats and nearly 20 per cent of the popular vote this time. In fact, the BJP in AP is in a peculiar position wherein it has more MPs than MLAs.

Chandrababu Naidu is personally responsible for much of this.

In the August coup of 1995, Naidu managed to wean most MLAs away from NTR largely because he held the organisation in his hands. That, in fact, was his greatest strength. While Rama Rao was the crowd-puller, Naidu was the party-builder. He initially built much of the party by converting NTR fan clubs all over the state into party cadre. But that very strength is now turning into a weakness.

As a senior party leader explained, "Naidu doesn't seem

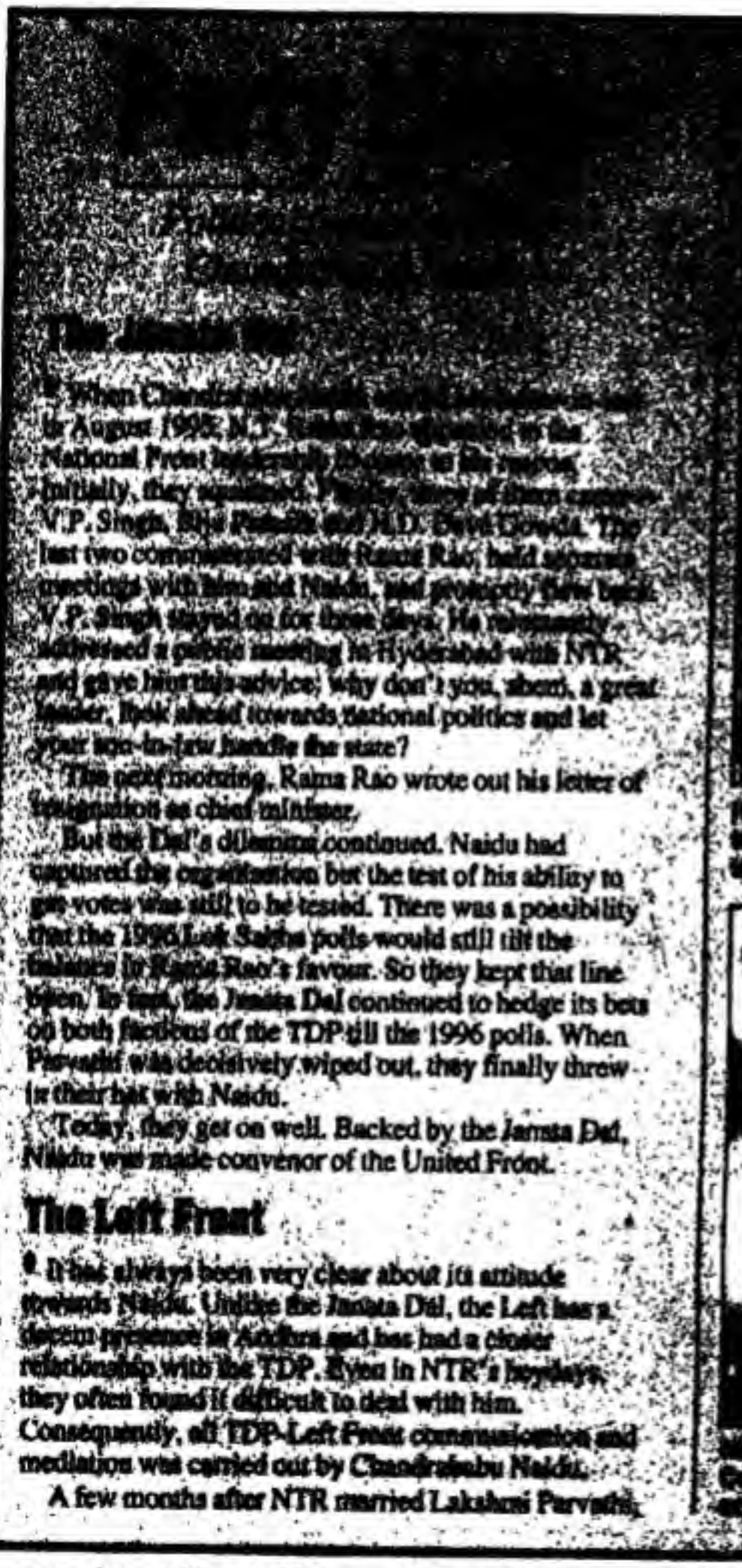
A.B. Vajpayee and L.K. Advani: many in Naidu's party want him to ally with the BJP

P.V. Narasimha Rao lost the Hanamkonda seat to the BJP in 1984 and almost decided to retire from politics

to be able to come to terms with the spontaneity of political activity. Over-bureaucratisation is killing the party."

For instance, Naidu handed out a yearly programme-calendar to all his district leaders in January this year. They were supposed to report back to him about the meetings they held, the community participation programmes they initiated, etc. "This puts off the party worker. Suppose his relatives are coming home that day, or his daughter is getting married. What does he do? He fudges the calendar." Slowly, this has alienated a lot of the TDP cadre from its leadership.

Even when the question of support to the BJP came up, Naidu held a politburo meeting and even called in all his ministers and newly-elected MPs. But instead of thrashing out the issue face to face, he handed out questionnaires to them on the repercussions of a tie-up with the BJP. For a social class that more or less survives on shouting and



Jayalalitha Singh Deo (seen) wants Naidu to vote against the BJP and take a shot at forming the government at the Centre

V.P. Singh, Biju Patnaik and N.D. Tiwari. The last two commiserated with Rama Rao, held separate meetings with him and Naidu, and promptly flew back. V.P. Singh stayed on for three days. He reluctantly addressed a public meeting in Hyderabad with NTR and gave him this advice: Why don't you, sheru, a great leader, look ahead towards national politics and let your son-in-law handle the state?

The next morning, Rama Rao wrote out his letter of resignation as chief minister.

But the Dal's dilemma continued. Naidu had captured the organisation but the test of his ability to get votes was still to be tested. There was a possibility that the 1996 Lok Sabha polls would still tilt the balance in Rama Rao's favour. So they kept that line open. In fact, the Janata Dal continued to hedge its bets on both factions of the TDP till the 1996 polls. When Parvathi was decisively wiped out, they finally threw in their lot with Naidu.

Today, they get on well. Backed by the Janata Dal, Naidu was made convenor of the United Front.

The Left Front

It has always been very clear about its attitude towards Naidu. Unlike the Janata Dal, the Left has a decent presence in Andhra and has had a closer relationship with the TDP. Even in NTR's heydays, they often found it difficult to deal with him. Consequently, all TDP-Left Front communications and mediation was carried out by Chandrababu Naidu.

A few months after NTR married Lakshmi Parvathi,

screaming, nothing could be more demotivating.

Naidu's loss of support in coastal Andhra has also dealt a blow to the party. This particular region was supposed to be N.T. Rama Rao's bastion ever since he formed the Telugu Desam in 1983, an area he had specially nurtured.

Rama Rao appealed to and empowered two largely ignored sections of society in this region — women voters and the Kammas. Rao had always appealed to the female voters because of the mythological roles he played in his films. And he was smart enough to consolidate this support base with numerous policy initiatives like the Rs 2-a-kg rice scheme and the imposition of prohibition.

The Kammas had seen decades of 'Reddy Raj', as they called it, with little or no taste of power. They were a very angry and disillusioned community. When NTR — also a Kamma — came to power, he changed that. And since then, the Kammas had also been a solid support base for him.

Chandrababu Naidu has squandered that legacy. He lifted prohibition and fielded just four Kamma candidates in the whole state. None of them won. The state has never wit-

The TDP was born on an anti-Congress ideology. To give that up would be to

Prafulla Kumar Mahanta: both he and Naidu have to face the Congress as the principal Opposition party in their respective states

When Chandrababu ousted N. T. Rama Rao in August 1995, the latter appealed to the National Front leadership to come to his rescue. Only three of them came to him: V.P. Singh, Biju Patnaik and H.D. Deve Gowda

Yadav

dealings to the point where the position is more or less the same as the BJP. Yadav wants Naidu to vote against the BJP. Naidu argues it is risky for Mulayam to be seen as a Congress ally because there is no Congress organisation in Uttar Pradesh (zero seats this time).

Prafulla Kumar Mahanta

This could be the budding of a new relationship. Mahanta and Naidu have to face the Congress as the principal Opposition party in their respective states and cannot dream of giving support to a Congress-led government. Also, while Naidu was actively considering aligning with the BJP, Mahanta has already paid a 'courtesy visit' to Atal Behari Vajpayee. There is, of course, one problem as a disappointed Naidu himself pointed out the other day: Mahanta does not have a single MP this time.

nessed such a situation under TDP rule before. In the Rajya Sabha, there are two Kammas: a little-known man called Allagadda Laxmi Prasad and Renuka Chowdhury, who is so precariously balanced in the party that she may not be renominated in April this year.

Two other important people from this community — Mohan Babu, the actor, and NTR's fourth son, Harikrishna — have also been sidelined. Mohan Babu has left the party and Harikrishna was given a Cabinet post after the coup when he wasn't a MLA. Six months later, when he did get himself to the Assembly, he was thrown out of the Cabinet.

A senior MP said: "Naidu tends to shy away from supporting Kammas. I don't know why. The popular feeling is that during any Congress regime, the *chaprasi* to the chief minister is a Reddy. Now, even a TDP government is behaving like the Congress."

And that is what accounts for the TDP's debacle in coastal Andhra where Kammas voted against the party *en masse*. The party managed only three out of 16 seats from that region.

This has made party workers jittery. Coastal Andhra

ive up the very reason for its existence

Naidu's 'Shramadaan' programme: the grassroots leader

returns almost as many MLAs as the Telengana region, and to be wiped out there augurs ill for them in the coming Assembly elections — due in December 1999.

But the TDP is used to fluctuating fortunes. After all, they have lost elections before. What makes this defeat different is the sudden growth of the BJP which has taken away most of the anti-Congress votes. The party may have got only four seats, but it managed 20 per cent of the popular vote against Naidu's 37 per cent. "And where do you think those votes came from?" says Chowdhury. "Like it or not, they come from our vote-bank."

In many constituencies, the BJP polled close to 2 lakh votes and was, in fact, largely responsible for the TDP's dismal performance. In Hindupur — again a TDP bastion — the BJP nominated a member of the old and notorious Pamadutri family. [According to one version, their deeds date back to British gazettes.] Though the BJP did not win the seat, it ate into the TDP vote so badly that, for the first time in years, Hindupur went to a relatively weak Congress candidate.

This is Naidu's dilemma. At a press conference, he tried to brush it off as a freak phenomenon: "People voted for Vajpayee and stability. In fact, when Vajpayee came to campaign, he pleaded with the people that this is not an election for the Andhra CM. It is an election for the Prime Minister. You can draw your own conclusions from that."

But, personally, Naidu knows better. There is a growing demand from within his own party to ally with the BJP. Says Daggubati Venkateswara Rao, NTR's other son-in-law who after many flip-flops has ultimately landed with the BJP: "It is Naidu who is sending feelers to us. He needs to join up with us. We don't."

While that may be a bit of an exaggeration, Daggubati argues that the TDP has 37 per cent of the popular vote this time. Of this, one assumes, he got half or 5 per cent of the Muslim vote. If he even abstains, he loses that 5 per cent. Also, if the BJP even marginally increases its performance, Naidu will be left with less than 30 per cent of the popular vote in the next Assembly elections. Not a very happy scenario.

Renuka Chowdhury agrees, if somewhat differently. "We will be treading on their toes. They've done a jolly good show and if we flop into their camp, they're not going to be very happy."

Which is why, in fact, while the central leadership wants Naidu's 12 MPs, the AP unit of the BJP wants no tie-up. In its recent state executive committee meeting, the state unit unanimously voted against any alliance with the BJP. The central leadership has been trying to tell local BJP leaders that an alliance with the TDP would help them consolidate their base [the only time they got eight MLAs in the Assembly was with the TDP's help in 1985] and penetrate tribal areas.

But opinion is still divided. Many BJP leaders feel that if they could get 20 per cent votes on their own — largely due to a strident anti-Naidu campaign — tying-up with him would be pointless. The local BJP unit was enthused by the fact that in some constituencies — Rajahmundry, for instance — disillusioned TDP workers actually helped the BJP candidate. And they hope that a disintegrating TDP may be to their advantage.

For the moment, however, the state unit of the BJP has been made to understand the political exigencies of the moment.

According to one version, while the party cadre are pushing for an alliance with the BJP, Naidu himself is personally inclined towards the United Front. After all, he is not only responsible for its formation, he is also the Front's convenor. The problem with him, however, is that he plays his cards very close to his chest. So much so, that even the UF is confused about his stand.

For instance, before the United Front core committee

Naidu doesn't seem to be able to come to terms with the spontaneity of

meeting, Mulayam Singh Yadav was on the phone constantly to Naidu. And he was positive that Naidu was not in the least inclined towards the BJP. As his aide Amar Singh said: "I will not believe anything unless I hear it directly from Chandrababu Naidu. At some point of time or the other, each one of us has had our doubts [about staying with the Front]. Only Naidu has been constant."

On the other hand, V.P. Singh has been expressing doubts in private over Naidu's stand. He has been wondering if Naidu hasn't already decided in favour of the BJP and is simply stringing along the rest of the UF.

To be sure, Naidu's public pronouncements have been evasive, though indicative. Asked if he considered the BJP a communal party, he repeatedly said: "I am secular." Asked if the Front had given up its fight against communal forces, he said: "The TDP has fought the Congress in the state. The UF has fought the BJP in the Centre."

The pressure on Chandrababu is immense. Apart from short-term and long-term political considerations, he has

I.K. Moopanar: critical of Naidu's 'maintaining equi-distance'

C. Rangarajan: Andhra's finance minister-in-waiting?

another problem. The state is in a financial mess. He abolished prohibition and the Rs 2-a-kg rice scheme. And despite adjusting for the additional revenue from there, he expects a Rs 3,600-crore deficit, over and above the budgeted deficit. If he doesn't find some money soon, he will soon have to start defaulting on his payments and will have to say goodbye to all the World Bank-aided projects he is looking forward to. And if that happens, he would have burnt his bridges from both sides — alienated the rural voter by withdrawing two very popular policies and lost the middle-class voter as all his other projects come to a dead stop.

Naidu is desperate and clutching at straws. Former RBI governor C. Rangarajan is now AP Governor and also a good friend of Naidu. There is talk in BJP circles of appointing him as their finance minister. If that happens, Naidu can hope for generous central assistance. He's giving more than a little thought to that prospect.

On the other hand, if he completely dumps the UF, he will have to give up his Left allies in the state who together

Amar Singh: "Each one of us has had doubts about staying with the UF. Only Naidu has been constant"

have 34 MLAs. If dissidents in the TDP decide to gang up with the Left and create trouble for Naidu, they would have quite a fun time of it. Naidu doesn't like that prospect either.

So far, he has tried to explain his problems to the rest of the UF, apparently to no avail. The first core committee meeting ended with no decision taken and even before the second meeting could be held, DMK's G.K. Moopanar had started criticising Naidu's policy of 'maintaining equidistance' from both the Congress and the BJP. He even suggested that Naidu may have to leave the Front if he goes the BJP way.

Naidu's problems also is that the new UF consists largely of the Left Front and Mulayam Singh Yadav, who between them have a little over half of the UF's 96 seats. As Naidu was quick to point out, both of them face little or no opposition from the Congress in both West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh [with the exception of Kerala], and can afford to talk of a broader secular alliance dominated by the Congress. In fact, while everyone else had almost given up, till the end Harkishen Singh Surjeet was talking of a 'secular government' at the Centre and kept enjoining Naidu "not to abandon principles for short-term gains".

But whatever faults Naidu may have, he is his own man. Not scared of taking difficult decisions. When he deposed NTR in August 1995, he told an emotional gathering: "I was in a dilemma — to protect my leader or to protect my party. I had to choose the latter."

This time too, Naidu will be prepared to pay any cost to save his party. Even if it means the end of the United Front in its present form. •

Sarita Rani/New Delhi and G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

political activity. Over-bureaucratisation is killing the TDP

CHOOSING A

Aspirants lobby for support, but it's Sonia Gandhi who holds the key

Sitaram Kesri did it with a smile. He arrived at the press conference 15 minutes late and graciously posed for the cameras. When the print journalists tried to hurry him, he smiled and said, "*Aap ki jigyasa teeyr hai, main jaante hun* (I know you are impatient)."

But they were not as impatient as members of his own Congress party. The night before he stepped down as party president, Kesri had a visitor—an old friend, Ahmed Patel.

"The mood of the party is that you should step down in favour of Sonia Gandhi," Patel said.

"But, whenever I have asked her to take over, she has always refused," said Kesri. "So why should I quit on your say-so."

Later, Kesri had other visitors. Some were friends. Such as Orissa chief minister J.B. Patnaik. Others, rivals like party vice-president Jitendra Prasada and the Kerala leader, A.K. Antony.

But it was Antony who really gave Kesri, what Pawar might call, a jolt from the blue. It is no secret that Antony is a favourite with 10 Janpath. In fact, even at the time when Narasimha Rao was removed as Congress president, it was Antony who was seen as a front-runner for the job. He was regarded as 10 Janpath's man.

So when Antony told Kesri that it was Sonia Gandhi's wish that he should step down in her favour, he knew it was for real. "After all, you have always maintained that you were ready to relinquish your post in her favour. Why are you hesitating now when she wants you to do so," asked Antony, somewhat naively.

Kesri enlightened him. "How did I know that she would *actually* ask me to step down in her favour?"

Rahul, Sonia, Kesri and Pranab Mukherjee at an election rally: crisis at the top

For once Antony had no answer. And for the rest of the day, Kesri exacted his revenge. He did not tell anyone what he had planned to do. Not even close friends such as Tariq Anwar volunteered more than a 'perhaps' when asked if Kesri would indeed resign. So when Kesri announced that he would be holding a press conference at 4.30 pm later that day, no one was quite sure what he would do.

"He won't step down," said a Pawar loyalist, an hour before the conference. "He'll probably just reiterate his claim that he is willing to step down whenever Sonia Gandhi wants him to. We'll just have to throw him out as we did Narasimha Rao."

But for once Kesri behaved with dignity. All along, it had been said that whatever his faults, at least Narasimha

LEADER

Rao represented a certain sense of decorum. For one, he did not jump around and call former Prime Ministers '*nikammas*' (worthless), as Kesri had done with Deve Gowda. But however much he might have lowered the dignity of the office while in power, the Congress president maintained its decorum at the time of relinquishing it.

Of course, there's a catch, say Pawar loyalists. "He has not really resigned as yet. All that he has done is offered to resign before the AICC delegates. And you know how long it takes to gather all of them."

But for Kesri this was a petty point. "Once you have resigned, you do not take back your resignation letter," he said quietly. Perhaps, the Biharibabu could teach the soft-spoken Manmohan Singh a thing or two about political etiquette. At least, then Singh would not

Sources close to 10 Janpath say that Sonia is not in a hurry to assume party presidentship. She'd rather wait a few months and then take over in the natural course of things

What will Sonia do next?

• In due course, take over as Congress president. Although she would have preferred to wait at least till the Atal Behari Vajpayee government to take oath, she was pre-empted by Sitaram Kesri's resignation.

• As far as the Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) leadership is concerned, she would like it to go to a leader who could take on Vajpayee, both in charisma and stature.

• She may also, at some point, appoint a working president. Perhaps, a loyalist like Arjun Singh, though it's not yet clear how far she trusts *she number*. Or perhaps, the Kerala leader A.K. Antony.

• It is her contention that the Congress should do a stint in the Opposition and strengthen the party organisation. For one, she is reportedly upset that most of the party leaders stuck to their home states instead of going to other constituencies to campaign. She would like to strengthen both the secondary leadership and the grassroots worker.

• When the Congress does make a bid for power, she is not a candidate for Prime Minister. Many Congressmen are interpreting her election speeches (for instance, when she said *ab mein khamosh nahin rahoongi*) as a sign that she is willing to take on the prime ministership, but that is not her aim. She would rather concentrate on the party and let the prime minister be a rubber stamp — like Manmohan Singh.

be so free in brandishing his resignation letter.

Once the Lok Sabha results started pouring in, the general opinion was that Kesri's days were numbered. Initially it was decided that the party's first working committee meeting should pass a resolution asking Sonia to take over the reins.

But sources close to 10 Janpath indicated that Sonia was not in a hurry to assume party presidentship. She would rather wait a few months and then take over in the natural course of things, rather than a midnight coup. So in the end, it was Kesri himself who arrived at the CWC, with Pranab Mukherjee in tow carrying a copy of the resolution that the CWC was expected to pass. The note merely thanked Sonia for her efforts in campaigning for the party. And also asked her to nominate the new leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party.

This was something that Pawar was expecting. Just before going to the CWC, he had told those close to him that it would be Sonia who would decide his fate, and not the party MPs.

While Pawar seemed reconciled to his fate, Kesri was not. Even when the results of the Lok Sabha started trickling in, Kesri confided to his friends with glee: "If they did not give me any of the credit, then I cannot be expected to take the blame for the bad show."

Manmohan Singh: clean image but lacks a strong base within the party

Wishful thinking, really. Just as Narasimha Rao was made a scapegoat for the Babri Masjid fiasco, it is now Kesri's turn to be sacrificed. And for all his claims that he was "hit by a brainwave when he went out for his morning walk", Kesri knew he had it coming when he decided to resign.

The signs were all there. When it came to defending Kesri after Sonia decided to campaign for the Congress, the party's numerous spokespersons went strangely silent. The best they could come up with was Salman Khursheed's "Kesri is our leader and Sonia is our inspiration". After the results were out, the party went hoarse in defending Sonia. Even Pawar attributed his victory in Maharashtra to Sonia. But no one mentioned poor Kesri. When his name was brought up, there were shifty looks and hasty reassurances of "Of course, he is our leader."

In fact, one of the few people to acknowledge Kesri was not his lobby of Muslim favourites (Remember Pawar's jibe about Kesri and his three *mias* with reference to Ahmed Patel, Ghulam Nabi Azad and Tariq Anwar), but Madhavrao Scindia. On a television programme he admitted that the party had benefited from having an organisational man like Kesri at the helm.

But Scindia was in a minority. Even Kesri loyalists such as Meira Kumar fell silent when asked why Kesri was not the party's candidate for Prime Minister.

But what next? Even if Sonia does assume the Congress presidentship, there is a paranoia in the Pawar camp that she might nominate a working president. And what if that person is Arjun Singh? In Congress-speak, just as there

SONIA LOYALISTS

Ghulam Nabi Azad: Sonia Gandhi's link with the media. Whenever there is an announcement to be made — say, regarding Sonia's travel plans — it is always Azad who briefs the press. Though, at times, it does seem as if Azad is not for Sonia does not want the Congress to stake claim to form the government; but Sharad Pawar, Azad's buddy from Maharashtra, does very desperately want to be PM. Guess who's side Azad is on? The answer is easy for any Azad-watcher: Sonia.

Manmohan Singh: Although Sonia is yet to say so openly, Manmohan Singh is being vetoed by sources close to 10 Janpath as her man-for-all-seasons. Singh is non-controversial, has a clean image, and (he) lacks a strong base within the party to be a threat to her. Etc, etc, that was also the argument in Narasimha Rao's favour way back in 1991.

Wouldn't it be better to back a known monster, than to create another new one?

A.K. Antony: Again, he has a suitably clean image to suit 10 Janpath. Unfortunately, he is not a member of the CPP, so he can't be her choice as CPP leader. But it was Antony who went over as Sonia Gandhi's emissary and asked Kesri to step down.

Ahmed Patel

Ghulam Nabi Azad

SHARAD PAWAR

In Congress-speak, just as there was a Sitaram Kesri for every Narasimha Rao, there is an Arjun Singh for every Sharad Pawar. The Maratha leader heaved a sigh of relief when Singh lost the elections

ARJUN SINGH

was a Sitaram Kesri for every Narasimha Rao, there is an Arjun Singh for every Sharad Pawar. The Maratha leader heaved a sigh of relief when Arjun Singh was defeated in the Lok Sabha elections. For if there was one person who would have certainly wrested his supremacy over the Lok Sabha, it was Arjun Singh.

It was only when Singh was safely out of the way, that Pawar began to earnestly lobby for the prime ministerial stakes. Just before the counting began, Singh had rushed to Delhi and made sure that CPI(M)'s Harkishen Singh Surjeet and BSP's Kanshi Ram suggest his name for the job.

But once he lost, Pawar took over. He persuaded the amenable Surjeet to propose his name and got Mulayam Singh Yadav, his ally from Maharashtra, to second it. But he had not really bargained for Sonia's non-cooperation.

Now it seems that it would be Sonia who would nominate/manufacture a consensus for the post of CPP leadership. Although the first preference would be Manmohan Singh, Pawar has persuaded most MPs to convince her of the futility of such a move. "It would have been okay if the Congress was in a majority," point out Sharad Pawar loyalists. "But in the case of a minority government, specially when the Congress is looking to topple the BJP, it would be irrational to have someone like Manmohan Singh. The need of the hour is a strong leader who can wheel and deal his way into the hot seat."

That man, of course, is Sharad Pawar.

And what are Sonia's options? As she herself tells people, the Congress needs someone strong enough to take on Atal Behari Vajpayee. Of course, Pawar would have to contend with all-time Sonia loyalists such as P.A. Sangma and Vijay Bhaskara Reddy. Fortunately for him, Andhra politics has taken care of the latter. There is no way that Chandrababu Naidu would support a government with Reddy at its helm.

More to the point, Pawar has also impressed upon MPs that to deny him his share as leader of the Opposition would be nothing less than personal vendetta.

Once again, as sources close to 10 Janpath would deferentially tell you, the ball is in Sonia's court. •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

Arjun Singh: He may be down, but he's certainly not out. Barely an hour after Kesri stepped down, the Pawar camp had already begun speculating if Sonia Gandhi would make Singh the working president. But remember what he did to Rajiv Gandhi in his earlier stint as working president? There is already talk of a Rajya Sabha nomination from Madhya Pradesh. Although chief minister Digvijay Singh will not approve, the senior Singh will make sure that his candidacy is suggested by 10 Janpath. Of course, it's still a mystery as to exactly who in 10 Janpath be's close —Madam herself, or her personal secretary V. George.

Nejma Heptulla

A.K. Antony

Ahmed Patel: Again, suitably non-controversial and clean to make the right impression on 10 Janpath. Patel was also one of those who lobbied to make Kesri step down in favour of Sonia Gandhi.

Stephen Koshy: Has provided inputs for Sonia's campaign speeches and was the first one to predict that there would be a new Sonia-Pawar axis. While this may help a little in developing the [illegible] with arch enemy Chandrababu Naidu, it fails to realise what he [illegible] and Pawar.

Daring to dream

What do Sharad Pawar and Jyoti Basu have in common? Both want to be Prime Minister but both are saddled with parties which say no

For Sharad Pawar, it was the moment of truth. When Sitaram Kesri announced his resignation as party president, he became, by default, the tallest leader in the party. In the post-election scenario, it was Pawar who had brought in the most number of Lok Sabha MPs. Other chieftains such as Arjun Singh and N.D. Tiwari could not even retain their seats.

In the circumstances, Pawar made huge concessions to his party. Although the Congress had a fighting chance to form the government in the Lok Sabha — and would have had no option but to elect him Prime Minister — he put aside his ambitions deferring to Sonia Gandhi's wish that the party should do a stint in the Opposition. Others may have claimed political morality as the driving force behind Sonia's grand gesture. Pawar understood clearly that she was doing this because she did not really trust Pawar.

It was now his turn to be rewarded for his good behaviour. With two (or three if you include the working president) party posts up for grabs, the way he saw it, the very least Sonia Gandhi would do was to make him leader of the Congress parliamentary party.

Before Kesri resigned, there had been speculation that the post could go to him and Pawar would get back his old seat as the Congress leader in the Lok Sabha. If not Kesri, then Manmohan Singh would be made CPP leader. At that time Pawar was resigned to his fate.

But not in the post-Kesri Congress. Even before Kesri had finished his press conference at the party headquarters, Pawar loyalists dropped in to visit the Maratha. And to assure him that they would support his candidature for CPP chief.

All this was very reassuring. But for Sharad Pawar it was also a test. At last he would find out exactly where he stood with 10 Janpath. If his claims were overlooked, it would be clear to him (and to the rest of the Congress party) that he was still *persona non grata* with Rajiv Gandhi's widow. On the other hand, if she made him leader of the parliamentary party, then she was prepared to forgive — a lot.

Pawar has done his bit to earn brownie points with 10 Janpath. When a reporter asked him recently if he had called on Sonia after the polls, he retorted: "Many times."

In fact, just after the elections, the Maratha strongman said unequivocally that the Congress should stake claim to form the government. But after he had called on Sonia Gandhi, he suddenly stopped publicly stating that the Congress should bid for Race Course Road (Pawarspeak for 'Make me PM at last').

Instead, he let his ally Ghulam Nabi Azad do all the talking. It was Azad who manned the mikes and insisted that the Bharatiya *janata* had not given the mandate to the Bharatiya Janata Party, therefore it was up to the secular forces to do the right thing and form the government.

Pawar, for his part, did what he was best at: winning over new allies by making deals. He already had the support of such United Front constituents as the Samajwadi Party and the Left in the form of Harkishen Singh Surjeet. The Bahujan Samaj Party had begun speaking his language indicating that it was open to the highest bidder. Others would follow. After all, if a Tata Sumo was the going rate, then topping that with an Opel Astra presented no great difficulty.

It isn't as if Pawar planned to go against Sonia Gandhi's dictates, say his friends. All that he had planned was to wait for the BJP to stake claim and then defeat the motion of confidence on the floor of the House. He figured that way he'd keep everyone happy.

If Pawar seems somewhat desperate in his bid for power, it's hard to find fault with him. Just as there would be no *agli bari* for Atal Behari, this seemed like Pawar's last chance to grab the top job: be it Prime Minister or leader of the Opposition. With Sonia in the fray, he was realistic enough not to hanker after the Congress presidentship, but ambitious enough to dream of CPP leadership.

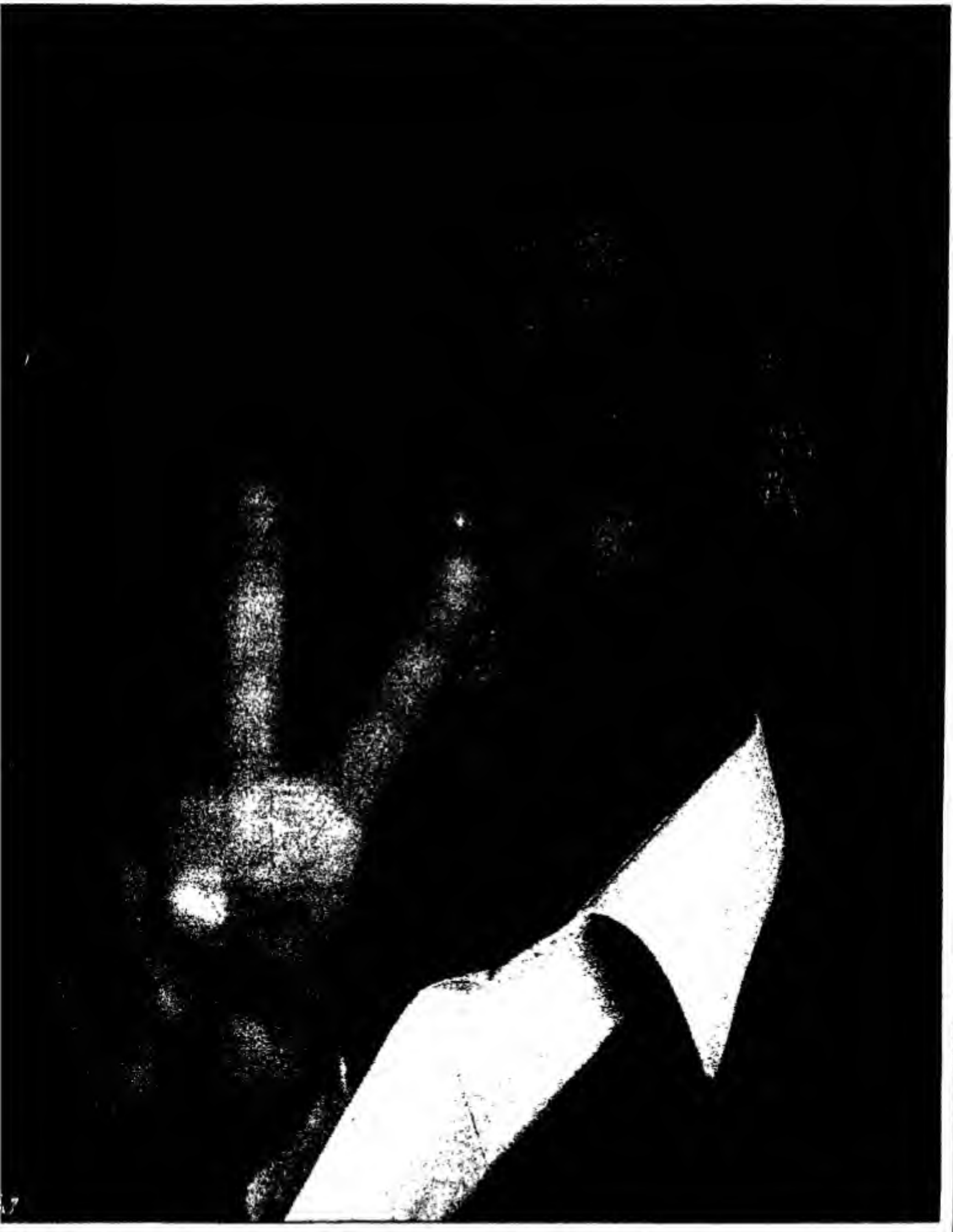
And in a sense to deny him the post of leader of the parliamentary party in favour of Manmohan Singh (nice man, but in coalition politics are nice men what you really need?) would look like personal vendetta on the part of 10 Janpath. Pawar is, after all, the only leader who has brought in as many as 33 MPs from his state.

From his point of view, the timing couldn't have been better. He had resurfaced at a time when other rivals were at an all-time low. When the UF government had been in power, while most Congressmen had been trying to win over Sonia Gandhi by demanding that the Congress withdraw support over the Jain Commission report, Pawar had kept silent. He had known that the party was in no shape to go to the polls at that point.

But once the elections were declared, he did not waste time in Delhi. Instead he hotfooted it to Maharashtra, where he worked out an alliance at the state level (instead of letting Kesri foul things up), and really worked there. For once, he did not play politics while distributing tickets — often giving in to rivals such as Murli Deora.

And it was only when he had 33 seats under his belt that he returned to Delhi saying the people of Maharashtra had given him a mandate to play a role at the Centre.

Are the people of Delhi listening? •



MR CONTROVERSY

[redacted] We know he is on a high, but the barbs flying thick and fast in the Pakistan Cricket Board aren't funny. Think of the slang-whanger that's going on.

First, chief selector Salim Altaf resigns because board chairman Khalid Mahmood asked Akram to fly to SA and join the team for the Port Elizabeth Test. "It's the selector's job to pick or drop a player," he said. "If the chairman is selecting players himself, there's no need to have a selection committee. He has violated the board's constitution."

Mahmood punched back: "I never thought him [Altaf] an expert on the PCB constitution. It was the board's decision to put Akram on the first available flight as soon as he declared himself fit."

It's stupid taking sides, but Altaf's version is that Akram was left out because there were match-fixing allegations against him. But once the probe panel cleared him, why the fuss?

Obviously, the feud runs deeper and, well beyond cricket. No wonder he is grimacing.

Akram: toe-ing off the feud?

Derek, Srinath and Juhi Chawla with two participants: all about presence

ART BECKONS

[redacted] While their spouses were embroiled in the political heat and dust, their better halves were busy with things more aesthetic. Last fortnight, Mrs Usha Narayanan and Sheila Gujral were at the Maurya Sheraton attending an Ikebana show and went into raptures over the rather whacky flower arrangements.

Incidentally, the First Lady is herself an Ikebana expert. Nothing whacky in that.

At the Ikebana show: aesthetic appeal

CELEB QUIZ

[redacted] It's a good day to be a quizmaster if those you are quizzing happen to be men like Khushwant Singh, Jaaved Jafferi, Mahesh Bhatt, Talat Aziz, Milind Soman and Rohit Bal.

The event: 199th and 200th episode of the Bournvita Quiz Contest on Zee TV and the quizmaster is Derek O'Brien. The two special episodes are slated for 22 and 29 March. It's presence that pulls, right?

Post script: Srinath and Juhi Chawla joined Derek on 1 and 8 March to conduct the fifth All-Asia Final of the BQC.

PROMISES TO KEEP

A file photograph of the Khanna wedding

[redacted] Now that Vinod Khanna has passed the electoral test by winning the Gurdaspur seat, it's his lawyer-wife Kavita's turn to pass through the crucible of fire. Accompanying Khanna on his campaign rounds, she promised a voter that the two would settle down en family in Gurdaspur.

Considering that Kavita has a flourishing legal career and is used to the city lights, will she quit Bombay for the little township. Also, the last time Khanna gave up films for *sanyas*, we know what happened.

Anyway, political promises are made to be broken.

VENGEANCE IS OURS

Basha being taken to court and site of the Coimbatore blasts: killer instincts

[redacted] In bloodshed we revel. Not his exact words, but it pretty much sums up Al Umma chief S.A. Basha's threat to the designated court-II judge. Basha's outburst came when the CBI's cancellation of bail application came up before Judge Arumuga Perumal Adityan who's probing the 1993 RSS office blast. "Atrocious," he said, "if the application is accepted, dire consequences will follow."

What can happen is anybody's guess. Last month it was the Coimbatore blasts and 60 people died. Maybe, violence has a kick — a kind of black humour.

GODS *of the* SM

Religious teachers are the new heroes of the middle-class television-watcher

While NEPC and ATN jostle over the credits for pioneering a fast-growing segment, senior media professionals feel it was the local cable operators who gave the religious discourse a presence on television

Sudhanshu Maharaj: liberally quotes from Ayurveda, Greek literature and Kahlil Gibran's poetry

They are the new heroes of the small screen. They are well-read, manifest a clearly above-average intelligence, speak in soft, compelling tones and smile frequently. What's more, they command a more intensely-loyal viewership than most of their counterparts on other programmes. They belong to the rapidly increasing tribe of television gurus.

While one was used to the occasional *bhajan* or Christmas Eve mass on DDI, religious programming really came into its own almost at the same time as cable and satellite invasion. "Two years ago, when we started, there was a complete dearth of programming for the elderly. Doordarshan was, of course, airing something called *Jeevan Sandhya* for old people — but there was a definite need for quality programming here," says Pradeep Gangal, vice-president, NEPC India Ltd, Delhi. "Many of the so-called religious gurus had even then a tremendous following — we decided to create a niche of our own with them."

Gangal believes that his is the only truly family channel — considering that in most middle-class Indian families the older generation often watches TV along with the youngsters. "Our programming was in stark contrast to the cultural shock created by *Baywatch* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*. As a part of our crusade to retain Indian values on satellite television, we accepted no liquor or tobacco advertisements."

NEPC is however not the only channel claiming credit for ushering in religious programmes. A senior marketing executive in ATN insists, "ATN was the first satellite channel of India, and religious programmes have been aired ever since its inception. We had observed the popularity of mythological serials like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* , and decided to take the plunge into religious programming. It was ATN who initiated the trend."

While NEPC and ATN jostle over the credits for pioneering a fast-growing segment, senior media professionals attribute it more to local cable operators. Religious programming was popularised, according to them, more by the IN and Citicable networks. It was the local cable operators who really gave the religious discourse (or *pravachan*) a presence on television.

Either way, today, the segment itself has grown substantially — and many

MALL SCREEN

RUPINDER SHARMA

more channels have hitched onto the bandwagon. While NEPC started off with Murari Bapu's discourses on the Ramayan, today they telecast discourses of Sudhanshuji Maharaj, Ramesh Bhai Ojha (who has a large following in Gujarat), Kirit Bhai (who is based in Britain) —and now plan to have Asaramji on air. ATN, which started with Asaram, now has programmes like *Sabad Gurbani* (discourses and *kirtans*), *Bhakti Amrit* (*bhajans*) and *Osho* (discourses of Rajneesh). Zee has also followed suit with various discourses of popular religious gurus. The IN cable network has launched a 'Bhakti channel' in Faridabad — an all-day channel dedicated exclusively to religious programming.

While NEPC telecasts these programmes almost throughout the day, Zee and ATN generally prefer to use the morning slot (6.00 am to 8.00 am). And though these programmes elicit a phenomenal viewer response in terms of letters and enquiries (both NEPC and Zee claim to receive a never-ending stream of queries about the contact numbers and addresses of the gurus), the television rating points (TRP) for *jagrans*, *bhajans* and discourses are at a measly 0.5 - 1.

"But viewer statistics in this segment cannot be based on existing surveys," says Gangal of NEPC. The extent of people's involvement in the programme also matters. A lady called recently to thank NEPC for airing these discourses. Her *bhabi* (sister-in-law), who had become insane, was apparently cured over a period, by watching one of these gurus.

"In any case," adds Gangal, "these

The crowd in ecstasy at a *pravachan* ceremony in Faridabad

RUPINDER SHARMA

THE HOLY TRINITY

The best-known and most-revered of the TV gurus

Murari Das Hariyani

Born in Mahuva village in Gujarat, the 52-year-old was initiated into religion by his grandfather, Swami Vishnu Devanand Giri. His training was based on *Ram Charit Manas*. At 14, he did his first *pravachan*.

This *katha vachak* (story-teller) picks up chapters and characters from *Ram Charit Manas*, explaining them with references to everyday life. Known for his practical interpretations of the religious text, Murari Bapu (as he is better known) has, arguably, the largest middle-class following today.

He lives with his family in Mahuva, though he travels in India and abroad frequently. Devotees say his schedule is fixed for the next 4-5 years in advance. He is frequently seen on NEPC, Zee, ATN, and the IN cable network.

Asaramji Maharaj

Originally from Sindh in Pakistan, Asaramji, 57, was brought up in Maninagar, near Ahmedabad. Disciples say that he was blessed by his guru, Lilashahaji Maharaj with "ultimate knowledge" and attained self-realisation at the young age of 23.

He has no formal education and can barely sign his name, but is known for his deep knowledge of religious scriptures like the Ramayan, Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads..Asaram's discourses are telecast regularly on ATN, Zee, Citi and IN cable networks.

The first *Sant Shri Asaramji Ashram* started in Sabarmati, Ahmedabad. Today, it has more than 60 branches in India and abroad.

Sudhanshuji Maharaj

Born in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, the 42-year-old guru was actively involved in the work of religious organisations since he was 20. He has been in Delhi for the last 20 years, mostly working for the Arya Samaj. He resigned from the Samaj, tired of the power politics in it, and began travelling in search of truth. He went to Uttarkashi and abroad. He believes his current elevated status is due to the divine inspiration of the Himalayan yogis.

Besides Indian religious scriptures like the Vedanta, Sudhanshuji Maharaj also seems well acquainted with Western philosophy, world history, Ayurveda, Greek literature, Kahlil Gibran's poetry and so on. He says he has been heavily influenced by Socrates and Plato, and interestingly, even by Dale Carnegie.

His discourses combine the teachings of several religious scriptures and gurus — Vedic literature, Guru Nanak, Kabir, Rahim, Chanakya etc. While many elderly viewers (some of whom have known him in his Arya Samaj days) dismiss him as an upstart Johnny-come-lately and scoff at his newly-acquired guru status; he is widely-appreciated for his easy-to-follow, practical school of thought. He is seen regularly on Zee and IN cable network.

Asaramji Maharaj: his organisation has more than 60 branches in India and abroad

TRP ratings are all bull. A sample size of 100 to 200 houses in Delhi and Bombay are not representative of the real viewership of a national programme." Sainath Aiyer, vice president, marketing services, Zee Telefilms, Bombay, admits that the picture in small towns could be different. "But as of today, the only organised data we have is metro-based."

And that apparently, is not good enough to attract big advertising revenue. ATN claims that their morning slot on religious programmes are almost 100 per cent booked by various advertisers for products ranging from *agarbattis* to pressure cookers to herbal medicines. NEPC manages to get some revenue from wood plantation and insurance companies. But the multinationals and larger Indian companies will not touch the segment with a bargepole. The best way to hook advertisers on these programmes is often, by offering a package deal with other high TRP programmes. "This January, we did get some advertisers for a Murari Bapu series on EL TV in the afternoon slot. But it was packaged virtually free along with a few other programmes," says Aiyer of Zee.

Yet not so long ago, HLL — the country's biggest advertiser — had sponsored a programme on the *Ram Charit Manas* on AIR at 6 am in the morning. And while the Lever's media buying agency insists that religious discourses simply do not exist as a media option, they do admit that the segment has tre-

mendous potential. "Today, these programmes are watched in the same way as one listens to background music," says Sandeep Tarkas, media director, HTA Fulcrum, Bombay. "Hardly the kind of stuff to invest your money in."

Is there reason to believe that a substantial number of housewives (Lever's key target audience) watch these programmes? "As of now, the only thing one can be sure of is that old ladies watch the programme," he laughs.

Some media professionals feel that advertising on religious programming, no matter how high the viewership, could have unpleasant repercussions on brand image. "It is likely to be construed as a political alignment of sorts. The situation today being as it is, these programmes are highly avoidable," says a senior media executive. And it's not just the media buying houses that are apprehensive. The national channel is extremely jumpy at the very suggestion of "religious" programmes. "No, no, no," declares Chandrashekhar, director, audience research, Doordarshan. "No individual will be allowed to use DD to propagate religious preachings. Occasionally, we have had devotional music. But we have never had discourses and we will never have them. It's a clear policy decision."

Most channels categorically deny allegations of a prominent Hindutva bias. "Our programming is not propagative in nature. These are objective discourses meant to be taken at face value," says Sainath Aiyer of Zee. NEPC and ATN are quick to point out that they also air programmes based on the religious texts of the Christians, Muslims and Sikhs.

"Two years ago, there was a complete dearth of programmes for the elderly," says Pradeep Gangal, vice-president, NEPC. "We decided to create a niche of our own with the religious gurus"

Religious discourses on television have probably fuelled an already latent need in the viewer. "These programmes have changed my life," says Usha, a housewife in a suburb of Delhi. "Who has the time to go all the way to a guru? If some people are coming forward to give us peace, what's wrong with it?"

For others, it is a more intense experience. Mr Bansi, manager of S.S. Cable, an operator in Faridabad, recalls the time when he tried to take the 'Bhakti channel' off air for some time. "I was showing Zee in place of religious discourses — but people started coming to our office to demand that we reinstate it. When people actually started cutting connections, we sat up and took notice." Another devotee, Jyoti Kapoor of Shalimar Bagh, says, "Murari Bapu is everything for me — my father, my guru, my god."

Murari Bapu has enthralled his audience with modern interpretations of *Ram Charit Manas*. He is frequently seen on NEPC, ZEE, ATN and the IN cable network

Nevertheless, religious discourses on satellite channels have come in for their fair share of flak.

Eminent political sociologist, Imtiaz Ahmed, believes that most of these programmes attempt to homogenise Hinduism around a core set of high caste values. "There are 582 versions of the Ramayana in Kumaon alone and 3000 versions in the entire country. Yet, most of these discourses privilege one version over all the others," he says. He is also of the view that these discourses propagate a Hindu fanaticism of sorts. "I was listening to one of these *pravachans* on Zee TV [in which] he was all the time talking about contemporary, day-to-day affairs including politics and there was no mistaking the BJP slant there."

Ahmed attributes the tremendous following these programmes seem to be

THE RISING SON

The new generation guru is more like a pop icon

We push and shove our way through the crowded entrance. The place is Faridabad, and the venue adjacent to a Shiv Mandir waiting its inauguration by Asaramji. We finally manage to wriggle in.

The sight is close to what one would see from atop Bombay's Victoria Terminus station in peak morning hours on a weekday. Thousands and thousands of squirming human beings crushed together — not dissimilar to a cross-section of a full-grown beehive. We stand on our toes to peer at the podium afar. Much to our surprise, we see a young man (at the most, in his late twenties) sitting on it, dressed in the traditional *brahmachari's* garb — of the purest silk.

He speaks in a hushed, modulated tone that sounds strangely like a cheap imitation of Asaramji's voice. The soft whispers are punctuated every now and then with a stringent "*Jai Ramji Ki* (Glory be to Rama)". And the crowds cheer hysterically. I nudge the woman beside me: "Who is he?" The woman comes out of a trance to whisper, "This is Narayan Swami — Asaramji's son. Asaramji says that his son was a great yogi in his last birth — that is why he is so learned at so tender an age. Now why don't you concentrate on what Swamiji is saying?"

We sit down quietly, suitably chastened. Many women have come prepared with pens and pads, and are busily jotting notes while the discourse is on. Swamiji intones, "America has nuclear weapons but India has saintly men (*Yeh mahapurushon ka desh hai*)." Suddenly, without warning, Swamiji's heavy-duty band-party (complete with drums, synthesiser etc.) breaks into a peppy beat — not very different from a number straight out of the Mithun Chakraborty-starrer *Disco Dancer*. The lyrics though would tend to classify the number as a *bhajan* — "Ram, Ram, Ram... (the pitch gets higher and higher) ... *shakti, mukti aur bhakti*." The crowd is clapping to the beat, tapping their feet, swaying their bodies.

I interrupt an elderly lady swinging her arms to Swamiji, singing "Aum, aum, aum" (the hep

RAMESH SHARMA

Narayan Swami: has adapted *bhajans* to a peppy beat

version of the sacred word 'Om'?). Doesn't she find the pronunciation slightly outlandish? "*Vaise to uccharan theek nahi hai. Yeh filmi-style bhajan bhi maine pehle nahi suna tha. Lekin yeh hamare guru hai — humse behtar jante hai* (the pronunciation does not seem right. Even this *bhajan*, sung in the filmi style, is new to me. But they are our gurus — they probably know better)."

The *bhajan* is over. Swamiji's voice sinks to a whisper again. The crowds are still coming in. As we move out, we find a middle-aged man — obviously an office-goer — at the door, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Eyes closed, one hand on his briefcase, the other on his right knee, fingers bent in the traditional age-old gesture of meditation. Maybe he *was* meditating. Peace comes to people in strange ways. •

enjoying to the new affluence of a growing middle-class. "Attending *satsangs* and giving donations is often part of the process of building social credentials," he says. The other kind of people who throng these gatherings, according to him, are those in need of networking. "Contemporary society has rendered a lot of people rootless. Watching a religious programme allows interaction with a kindred community."

Renowned sociologist Yogendra Singh, however, affirms that this is no new phenomenon. "Religions have always had two sides," he says. "One is the Gyan Marg — which the ones with deeper sensibility can pursue. It is not for everybody. The Bhakti Marg, a celebration of God often expressed in song and collective activities, is the common man's route to God."

Senior political scientist at Jawaharlal Nehru University, C.P. Bhambri, believes there is a method to this madness. "Today's nouveau-riche middle-class draws its reference points from Western consumerism." Like instant coffee, he believes, "this is a convenient instant-religion of sorts. Religiosity for them is no longer an individual thing between 'me and my God'. It has to necessarily be a public affair." Adds Bhambri, "This so-called religiosity is a status symbol. And since the lower middle class has always made the upper middle class their role model, this phenomenon has also trickled down to them."

However, Bhambri maintains that these are inherently middle-class gurus. "These gurus are exploiting the insecurity of the upper middle class and the blind faith of the lower. A considerable section of the women who will tap their feet to the pop *bhajan* will also listen to 'Guru Shahnaz Husain'."

Bhambri finds it ironical that science and technology should be used for the spread of religion. "In India the success of serials like *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* started off a new spate of media gurus who want to operate on a larger national level. They often have large business houses backing them. Upper and middle-class households have cable connections and they are the desired target audience of these gurus." The cable and satellite invasion, feels Bhambri, has done more damage from within than from abroad.

Anyway, like distance education, we now have distance religion. And good or bad, it's certianly convenient. •

Chitralekha Dhamija/New Delhi

(Sitting from left) Murli Manohar Joshi, Lal Krishna Advani and Atal Behari Vajpayee: men behind the saffron surge

THE RISE OF THE BJP

What does 50-year-old Holkhomang Haokip from Manipur have in common with Bishnu Pada Ray from Andaman and Nicobar Islands? What links Pandurang Dattaram Raur from Goa; Baddam Bal Reddy of Hyderabad and Nand Kumar Sai from the tribal constituency of Raigarh in Madhya Pradesh?

Political anonymity at the national level for sure. But only for now. All of them came within hand-shaking distance of becoming Lok Sabha members as they all came a close second in the electoral race that saw the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) spread out to new areas. Bishnu Pada Ray came snapping at the heels of young Manoranjan Bhakta, the dour, Congress(I) MP from Andamans who has represented the constituency more than three times already.

In fact, assess the data that is pouring into the Ashoka Road central office of the BJP and you find it tells many interesting stories. For one, that apart from Maharashtra and Rajasthan, the two states where even the BJP admits there was an anti-BJP wave, the 87 BJP MPs who have come second in the election all contested in areas where opponents of the BJP are strongest.

The Bharatiya Janata Party has spread far and wide in India and has made inroads into areas which were considered impregnable for the outfit

Examine the data a little more closely and you find the 87 constituencies are dominated by communities traditionally deeply critical of the BJP. In fact, critics of the BJP had always predicted that the party would find it virtually impossible to make inroads in these constituencies, whether in West Bengal or in Tamil Nadu.

And if the 1998 election is about the emergence of forces behind a BJP-led coalition, then it is equally about the constituencies where the BJP *will* make it the next time around. The results clearly demonstrate what party general secretary, K.N. Govindacharya told some journalists a few years ago: "There is no question of replacing the Congress, we shall be the next Congress."

When the results of the 1996 polls were being analysed, many commentators divided the country into regions where the BJP had significant presence and where it had no presence, meaning that the BJP would have to work up a miracle to make any inroads in these

SUNDAY WEEK

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 18 JANUARY, 1998

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

Take dramatic strides forward, but don't attract undue attention to your plans and intentions. Stealth and secrecy can be essential to the success of your schemes. Don't be too ready to spill the beans, even to people you are close to. Your best work will probably be done behind the scenes.

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

Beware of jumping to hasty and false conclusions about loved ones. You can help reduce tensions by compromising, even if your mate or spouse is in the wrong. Those who advise others on financial matters or investment policies can have a productive week. They are likely to win new clients.

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

It's important to be absolutely conversant about the latest developments in your particular field of endeavour. Make sure you have all the relevant facts and figures on your fingertips before going into high-level discussions or negotiations.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

You are being too judgemental and critical. Be more lenient in your views of others. A few words of encouragement can be far more constructive than criticism. Harbouring resentment or seeking revenge will cultivate an atmosphere of suspicion.

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

A distant engagement can be put off. Relationships with local folks can be strained. You may find it hard to explain your activities to those who have been watching your comings and goings. It may be best to take no for an answer, even though your heart may be set on seeing the sights.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

Hidden forces are in your favour. Events are likely to work out with very little effort on your part. Tensions between home life and professional ambitions should now ease up. Someone you have known just as a friend can be seen in a romantic light.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

Concentration can be broken. Stick to your task if you are finalising a personal project and hope to make it pay. Social frivolities are not for you till you have completed what you are trying so hard to do. Family ties can appear very strong. You may be thinking of someone you knew long ago.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

Stay on your toes. There may be difficult situations that will require snap decisions or instant action. Employment affairs will be taxing. Those of you who are seeking new jobs, scan the papers for promising positions. Don't break the rules.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

Charm and goodwill will melt the hardest of hearts. Insist that others give you definite answers or decisions, especially concerning financial matters. You may have a key role to play in raising money for worthwhile causes. Do not be put off in the face of stiff competition or opposition.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

Meet others at least halfway if confrontations and upsets are to be avoided. Romantic partners can be hard to please. They may go against your plans and suggestions just to aggravate you. Property dealings are unlikely to be as simple and straightforward as they had first appeared.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

You may have a clash of interest with your partner. You are better off by leaving some ideas to develop. A lonely or a sick youngster may be looking for attention and this cannot be denied. Friends are far too enthusiastic for your liking about a project that you are sure will never get started.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

Work conditions will be much to your liking. Pressure will be light. Co-workers, supervisors and business associates will be helpful and friendly. Keep your nose to the grindstone, and you can work your way into the boss's good books. •

Saying it with a book

Atal Behari Vajpayee doesn't like being in Delhi on Christmas Day, his birthday. He likes to spend it away in the hills, watching the snow fall, celebrating his alone-ness.

But his last birthday was celebrated in Delhi with family and friends. He got many gifts. Among them, from his dear friend, lawyer N.M. Ghatate, was a book. Ghatate grinned as Vajpayee unwrapped his birthday present. And Vajpayee had a good laugh. The book was called *Yes Prime Minister*.

HEARD IN THE AICC OFFICE

Atal Behari Vajpayee has become Prime Minister at last—with the outside support of the BJP.

A CONGRESS MP COMMENTING ON THE DELAY IN ALLOTMENT OF PORTFOLIOS IN THE A.B. VAJPAYEE GOVERNMENT

A.B. Vajpayee: Yes Prime Minister

Reflected glory

Before they became principal secretary and private assistant to the Prime Minister, Brajesh Mishra and Shakti Sinha were often spotted at Delhi's Gymkhana Club, just across the road from the Prime Minister's current Safdarjung Road residence. No one paid much attention to them when they came in for a meal or a quiet bottle of beer. But that was not the case last week. The day Mishra's appointment was announced, the duo had lunch at the Gymkhana Club, dropping into the bar for quick Bloody Marys. But gone was the anonymity of yesterday. As they entered the dining room, there was a surge of people to congratulate them—presumably with a view to building bridges for the future. They were interrupted throughout their lunch which just set on the plate and got cold.

Not the most enjoyable lunch Mishra and Sinha have had. But then they pay the price for fame.

CHECK-LIST

The United Front: states where it still exists

■ **Andhra Pradesh:** Despite four meetings, the United Front hasn't been able to resolve the tricky issue of the Telugu Desam Party and its decision to abstain in a vote against the BJP. With Andhra Pradesh chief minister Chandrababu Naidu refusing to submit to the bullying of the United Front, AP is really on the fence.

■ **Uttar Pradesh:** Like the praying mantis which eats its spouse, Mulayam Singh Yadav has all but finished off all the other members of the United Front in UP. He's the only evidence of the United Front left in Uttar Pradesh.

■ **Karnataka:** Chief minister J.H. Patel is struggling to cope with the twin assault by Janata Dal rival Ramakrishna Hegde's Lok Shakti and the BJP. The United Front is still there, but not for long.

■ **Jammu and Kashmir:** Never-say-die Farooq Abdullah has declared that he will always be part of the Opposition coalition—that is the position opposed to the BJP. But it is confident on one count that the UF should have its most committed supporter from a state that sends less than 10 MPs to the Lok Sabha.

The other Gandhi

The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation (RGF) is worried at the BJP's choice of the minister of welfare. Maneka Gandhi, one of the Gandhi widows has been made welfare minister with Independent charge. Maneka Gandhi herself may not be too pleased with this portfolio. But the RGF is downright gloomy. This is because many of the projects RGF takes up and funds go to the welfare ministry for clearance. Sanjay's widow has made her views about Rajiv's widow quite clear. So RGF is hoping Maneka won't create problems for Sonia.

There is more than one dimension to the battle of the Babur.

Maneka Gandhi: will she create problems?

Back boncher

The swearing-in ceremony had its moments for many who attended. But the loneliest man there was surely Bansi Lal.

The Haryana chief minister, an old and trusted friend of the BJP, could manage just one seat in the Lok Sabha. It was badly compromised because its rival, the O.P. Chautala-led Haryana Lok Dal(R) managed three seats and then offered them to the BJP.

Bansi Lal: a lonely man

As a result, it was a chastened Bansi Lal who walked in at the swearing-in quietly and sat down in one of the back rows, where peons and *chaprasis* normally sit.

Pramod Mahajan noticed Bansi Lal sitting at the back and ran to him. "*Aap to hamare mitra hain, aap aage aaiye* (You're our friend, please come at the front)," he remonstrated with Bansi Lal, who held his own and wouldn't get up. Finally, when Mahajan didn't take 'no' for an answer, Bansi Lal told him tiredly: "*Arrey Mahajanji, aap kabhi hamen uthate hain, kabhi girate hain, ham jahan hain, theek hain* (Now you make me get up, now you bring me down — I'm fine where I am)."

Mahajan pretended he hadn't heard and escorted him to the front rows.

HEARD IN THE CENTRAL HALL

Q: Why is the BJP quiet about Article 370?

A: Because it's more worried about 270

A UNITED FRONT MP

Berthing problems

Dilip Ray should be happy he's managed to get a berth in the government, though he's only a minister of state. He very nearly didn't make it.

Ray split the Janata Dal and joined the Janata Dal(Biju), led by Naveen Patnaik. But because he was a Rajya Sabha member, he was told he would not become a minister — because he didn't belong to the Janata Dal(Biju).

This was a major problem. But Ray is a resourceful politician who is not wanting in resources. So instead of contesting a seat in the Lok Sabha, or resigning his Rajya Sabha seat and contesting another one, he just went ahead and split the Janata Dal in the Rajya Sabha and formed the Janata Dal(B) with four other members. As a result, not only did he manage a seat for himself but also, brought five more members to the BJP coalition. And took the oath as minister.

Dial M for Mamata!

In Delhi, some names can be very confusing. On the morning of 19 March, Mamata Banerjee was informed by her PS that someone called George was on the line. She took the cordless telephone, because she knew it was George Fernandes, the new defence minister and an old friend, who was calling. She was right.

On the same evening, as she was preparing to leave for the airport to catch her flight to Calcutta, she was told by her PS: "Madam, George is on the line." Mamata wondered why would Fernandes call again. Nevertheless, she took the line. And immediately her countenance changed. It was Vincent George, the secretary to the Congress CPP leader Sonia Gandhi, who was calling. "Madam wants to talk to you," said Vincent.

Mamata Banerjee: thank you, Madam!

And then Sonia came on the line. "Mamata, congratulations!" she said. "Congratulations to you too, Madam, for becoming the CPP leader." Niceties over, Sonia came to the point. "Why don't you drop in and have tea with me today," she asked. "No, thank you, Madam, I have lots to do before I leave for Calcutta," said Mamata.

But Sonia was not willing to give up. "All right, but next time you are in Delhi, you should definitely have tea with me," she insisted. Mamata was too confused to say anything, but 'yes'. But perhaps she wondered: 'why now, when Sonia could have done this a long time back and prevented her from leaving the party'. Times really change fast.

CHECK-LIST

The best speakers in the new Parliament

- **L.K. Advani:** The MP from Gandhinagar and the new home minister speaks with clarity and authority. And because he has credibility, people listen to what he's saying — so he has no need of drama and verbal flourishes.
- **A.B. Vajpayee:** Speaks well, with one liners, flourishes, etc., but has the classical debator's trick of souping up his speeches so much that even when he's saying nothing you're compelled to listen.
- **Rajesh Pilot:** Speaks forcefully, but sometimes energy is a poor substitute for content.
- **Manmohan Singh:** By no means a riveting speaker. But is intelligent, respected and can build up a good argument. Shyness is his biggest handicap.
- **P Chidambaram:** Speaks with clarity and feeling. Knows a lot so can get away with a lot.

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THE END OF THE UNITED FRONT

SUNDAY

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The young and the restless

They abhor violence and are staunchly Indian. But more Pakistan-trained extremists are in hiding here than ever before. Understanding the Muslim youth

DISASTER 8

Twister

A tornado devastates villages on the West Bengal-Orissa border

DIPLOMACY 11

Homecoming of sorts

Richard Celeste, the new US ambassador, has his roots in India

No spine

The return of dynastic rule clearly indicates how low sycophancy can make you stoop (*Return to the dynasty*, 22 — 28 March). Next in line are surely Rahul, Priyanka and her husband! If at all there is any positive side of Sonia's elevation, it's the ignominous exit of a treacherous schemer like Sitaram Kesri. In democracy, the saying goes, we get what we deserve. Well, we got Sonia for the Congress, which in no circumstances should be allowed to come back to power. One, they have done away with all ideology, and two, they brought in Sonia just to stop the BJP. You can't rule with such lack of spine. A shame, really.

Dr U.S. Iyer, Bangalore (Karnataka)

■ It's unfortunate that the 112-year-old Congress party couldn't find a leader of calibre to lead it. It has fallen back so obsequiously on the Gandhi family to guide it. With Sonia taking over the reins of the party one can guess what's going to happen to the Congress.

Sonia had an ulterior motive when she took up the party presidentship. It wasn't for the revival of the party or to save it from utter collapse. She knew that the BJP would now let the cat out of the Bofors bag. And if she didn't involve herself in the rough and tumble of politics, it would spell doom for herself and for her family.

Shampa Chatterjee, Calcutta (West Bengal)

Quit, please

People seem to have forgotten the despicable role Chandra Shekhar played when lured by prime ministerial ambitions he split the Janata Dal (*India's most misunderstood politician*, 8 — 14 February).

Chandra Shekhar never concealed his dislike for V.P. Singh. So when Singh did manage to become PM, Chandra Shekhar, angry and envious, started plotting his moves. Opportunity came when Rajiv Gandhi offered to make him Prime Minister with Congress support.

Sonia: SOS, Madam!

Without a qualm, he split the Dal — playing right into Congress hands. Poor, Chandra Shekhar! His tenure was too short to be savoured.

Greedy politicians like him should retire from public life early. Unfortunately, such politicians continue to be in the limelight and are even defended for their actions. No wonder, India's in a mess.

A. Viswanathan, Bombay (Maharashtra)

A squabbling lot

This refers to the story *Sacrificing both Pawar and power* (8 — 14 March). Congressmen are like middle-school children quarrelling over who will be captain and, not finding a common choice, turning to their teacher (Sonia) for help. If a party with such a rich heritage cannot take simple decisions unanimously, it puts a full-stop to our expectations.

Internal feud has also accounted for its electoral debacle. I think the electorate has shown enough wisdom in not giving the Congress the mandate to rule. For, every decision it takes, it has to run to Sonia because all the rest are either backstabbing each other or squabbling. Nehru probably never even thought that his party would face such dark days one day.

Bedashruti Mitra, Raigarh (Madhya Pradesh)

Money-spinners

The story *Cold comfort* (8 — 14 March) reminds me of the nightmare my colleague's family had to go through at Batra Hospital in Delhi. My colleague who had a liver problem went into coma and died. But the hospital authorities refused to hand the body over to his family members as Rs 20,000 was still due. My colleague's wife was not in a position to clear the dues.

At last our boss Dr Sudhir Sachdeva cleared the dues. The whole episode left a bad taste in the mouth and made me change my opinion of the medical profession that has lost its ethics. These fancy hospitals are out to make money and literally fleece those who have the misfortune to fall ill and come to them for treatment.

S.B. Srivastava, New Delhi

Hardly humble

Deve Gowda's election campaigns in Hassan, Karnataka (*Of betrayal and betel nuts*, 22 — 28 February), raise questions about his credibility. His bluster about rising from the ashes to become the PM again exposes not only his selfish interests but also the hollowness of his claim of being a 'humble farmer'. The report of Gowda's supporters riding 'high' and cheering drunkenly at a rally in Channarayaptna and doling out sarees, shirts and watches, besides liquor, explodes his claim of being 'poor'. And his plea to the three lakh Vokkaliga voters in the name of caste and 'Kannadiga' pride reveals his own

sampradayikata much more than the communal forces he is pretending to fight against.
Amarnath Kamat, Bombay (Maharashtra)

Show some respect!

M.F. Husain probably revels in outraging Hindu sentiments (*Husain now*, 8 — 14 March). First, he portrayed Goddess Saraswati in the nude and

Husain: transgressing decency

said it was his 'artistic freedom'. Now it's another theme — Hanuman carrying a nude Sita. Who gave Husain the licence to portray Sita in this vulgar form? Will he ever dare to paint figures from other religions and hope to get away with it? He shouldn't test the patience of Hindus beyond a point, because this time, even liberal Hindus have taken exception.
N. Prasad, New Delhi

Hollow men

Kalyan Singh indeed knows how to hang on (*The great survivor*, 8 — 14 March). Singh seems to have been inspired by the dictum that end justifies the means. It's sad that while all these leaders speak about how they abide by Gandhiji's values, none has the courage to live by what Bapu preached: means must govern the end. But no one expects that from Indian politicians.
A. Jacob Sahayam, Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala)

Noble effort

I have read the story *Saving grace* (1 — 7 March) with interest. Yasin Pathan must have been a really inspired man to take upon himself the task of restoring Hindu temples in ruin. In a way, it was triumph of art over material self-interests. Else, he wouldn't have taken on the burden at the cost of family interests. He deserves all possible support in his crusade and a fund should also be raised to help his family.
Vinayak D. Gawde, Andheri (Maharashtra)

Gutsy lady

Mamata Banerjee has paid the Congress back in their own coin (*People of this state need an alternative*, 15 — 21 March). The Congress must be ruing their lack of vision in backing WBPCC chief Somen Mitra and ignoring Mamata. Now, with her MPs she is a force to reckon with, both in the Lok Sabha and in Bengal politics. Already, the communists are feeling shaky, such is her impact. Let's hope she plays her cards well and show how short-sighted the Congress was under Kesri.
Mahantesh R. Yadwad, Dhanbad (Bihar)

Mamata Banerjee: making an impact

Tactless leader

You have rightly pointed out that Kesri's position is worse than Narasimha Rao's (*It's lonely at the top*, 1 — 7 March). And I think, the Congress would do itself some good if it also showed him the door now. Had the old man been a little tactful in handling Mamata Banerjee, the party wouldn't have fared so badly in West Bengal. Instead, it was his bull-headedness that saw Mamata and the BJP through. In a Lok Sabha where even a single vote counts, this was a costly error.
Samir M. Mahajan, Chandigarh (Punjab)

Kesri: a grievous error

Sleeping Commission

Your story *Rigging* (8 — 14 March) was an eye-opener. It's time somebody brought out the details of this very important aspect of our elections. Of course, it would have been better if there was available data on how much rigging affected the outcome in particular constituencies. It's disheartening that the Election Commission sits quiet on this issue. The term 'list updating' doesn't seem to exist in its vocabulary!
Shalli Sathyu, Kotwara (Uttar Pradesh)

Pictures accompanying the feature 'Little big men' *(29 March — 4 April) were by Aminur Rahman.*

Contributed by Shyamal Kumar Manna, Calcutta (West Bengal)

MILESTONES

HELD: by the Supreme Court, on 26 March, that parents of a child who had suffered brain damage as a result of negligence by the staff of a private hospital were entitled to separate compensation.

ADJOURNED: by a British court, on 23 March, the trial of Indian music director Nadeem Akhtar, till 20 April, after his lawyers pleaded for more time to present the case.

SUSPENDED: Indian cricketer Sourav Ganguly, for one match,

by Peter Van Der Merwe, match referee, on 27 March, for showing dissent after being given out by umpire David Shepherd, during the Bangalore Test between India and Australia.

ELECTED: Telugu Desam Party member of Parliament G.M.C. Balayogi, as Speaker of Lok Sabha, on 24 March. He was elected by a voice vote.

REVIVED: by defence minister George Fernandes, the defence minister's committee, on 24 March, to ensure coordinated action.

STAYED: by the Supreme Court, "till further orders", on 27 March, the death sentences against all the

SIGHT & SOUND

SUDHIR TAILANG/*THE HINDUSTAN TIMES*

■ The electorate will lash you with *chappals* if you threaten me, and your power will be lost. I dare you to do this. The people are behind me, not you.

BAL THACKERAY, *admonishing ministers in the Maharashtra state government*

■ Foreign investment is welcome but it would be only in priority areas. It will not be encouraged in those areas where the foreign investor is coming for his own profits.

YASHWANT SINHA, *Union finance minister, replying to a discussion on the interim Budget*

■ We are not for power. We will do whatever that is in the interest of the party and the state. How can they ask me to oppose the BJP when they want to support the Congress?

N. CHANDRABABU NAIDU, *Andhra Pradesh chief minister, prior to the confidence vote of the Vajpayee government*

■ The House has a tradition of members exchanging blows right since its inception. Why should I regret?

RABRI DEVI, *Bihar chief minister, after BJP MLAs demanded the chief minister's apology following pandemonium in the House*

■ We do not know what happened between the two in that closed-door meeting, after which Jayalalitha changed her mind.

SOMNATH CHATTERJEE, *CPI(M) MP, talking about the AIADMK chief's meeting with Jaswant Singh*

■ Never in my life have I tried to prove anything to anyone.

SOURAV GANGULY, *Indian cricketer*

SEEN

STUFF OF DREAMS

A mother's struggle to educate her two little kids

PRADIP SANYAL

LONG ROAD TO HOPE: *Shikha Ghosh with her two sons*

We live in our dreams, but can you build your dreams on a stack of coins? You can, at least that's what these two little kids and their mom believe. Here's their story—and their tragedy too.

Their names first: the one in the middle is Prasenjit, he is the elder of the two. Abhijit is the other one. On their left is their mother Shikha Ghosh who supplies small change to bus conductors. What's her cut? Five rupees for every hundred. But how did she come here and why?

The why first. Her husband Kartick had lost his job when the jute mill where he worked closed down. It was tough carrying on, so here she was, collecting small change from houses — there's a cut here too, only this time she is the one paying the cut—then trekking from Sealdah, where she stays, to busy, raucous Dalhousie.

It's routine, endless grind—one of those cruel cusps of life. But that's what fate has decreed, and this is what she has to do if her dream has to come true. Her two sons must get some education — Prasenjit is in class two, one higher than his brother—and probably fight it out when the time comes.

But why bring them with her. Footpaths are hardly the place to study. "There's nobody at home to look after them," says Shikha. "And when they get stuck somewhere, I can always help out." Faith can move mountains.

Soulless city, where you walk down the roads, down broken pavements, dodging, weaving through the jungle of legs, tightening the soles of your feet on slippery tram-rails... but how many have paused in the middle of their stride and turned their eyes on this little, compact image of innocence?

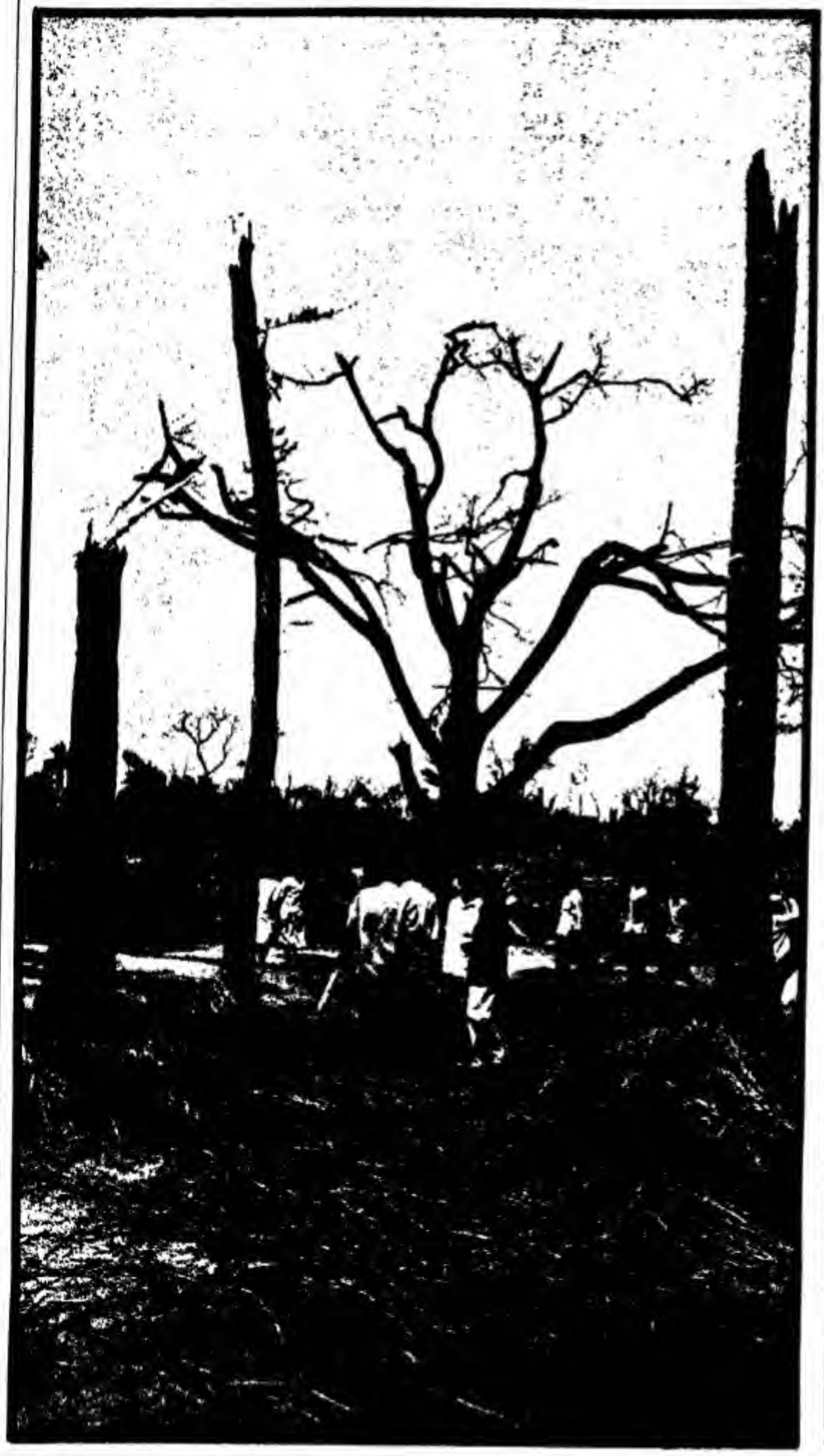
Not many. We live, wrapped in our own cellophaned dreams. If Shikha has a dream, it's her own little fancy. "One day, when all those who have dared to dream are asked to take stock of what they have achieved, my two little boys would stand up and say, 'Yes, our mom struggled but not in vain. She dreamed and passed her dreams on to us. Today, we are what we are.'"

Touching, isn't it? A mother's effort to give her sons some kind of dignity. Never mind she earns only Rs 30-40 a day, it's important that she goes on dreaming, keeping an eye on the boys as they study, sitting on a dusty pavement in the heart of the city.

I walked on, jingling the loose coins in my pocket. •

Pradip Sanyal/Calcutta

It's routine, endless grind — one of those cruel cusps of life. But this is what she has to do if her two sons have to get some education



TWISTER!

A tornado leaves a trail of death and destruction along coastal West Bengal and Orissa

As the day broke on 24 March, Ram Patra and his friends at Sijua village of Dantan in Midnapore district of West Bengal sat down to plan out their chores for the next few days. They didn't expect the weather to improve. The heat was cruel. Ponds were drying up and sleep at night was far from pleasant. Life had become unbearable for the people living in the coastal hamlets of West Bengal and Orissa.

There were still no rain clouds in the sky and they desperately prayed for rains. Little realising it was a death wish.

At 2.25 pm, almost the entire village of Sijua was asleep. The silence was ominous. Except for a few people, including children playing on the nearby fields and those at school, none was awake to witness nature's most devastating act. It lasted for a few minutes and by the time it was over there was destruction all around.

"I was woken up by a siren-like sound. I came out of the hut. There was a strong wind sweeping across the paddy fields. I heard the creaking of houses. And then the sky exploded," said a dazed Patra, who lost his family. "The gusty wind took the form of a violent storm and I saw a dark ball of fire rushing at us. Then it was all over."

The tornado hit Midnapore at about 2.30 pm and after destroying several villages snaked its way to Gobarghata in Orissa at 3.15 pm. It ravaged 17 villages in Dantan, Egra and Mohanpur blocks of Midnapore and five in the Balasore district of Orissa. The worst-affected villages were Baipatna, Sarta, Sijua, Sonakonia and Chak Ismailpur in Midnapore and Gobarghata at Jaleswar in Balasore.

Result: the twister killed more than 200 people in two districts, injured thousands, flattened hundreds of huts and left more than 10,000 homeless. Travelling at more than 200 km per hour, the tornado uprooted trees, telegraph and electricity poles, butchered livestock, lifted huge fishes out of water, killed

children, ravaged 250 acres of wheat and several hundred acres of pan fields.

Death loomed large in Midnapore and Balasore. At Sarta, bodies were strewn all over. In Chak Ismailpur, several farmers were lifted off the field by the ruthless force of the wind and thrown 300 yards away, killing all of them in the process. At Gobarghata, 2,000 huts were razed to the ground and more than 25 people were reported to be killed.

School buildings at Baipatna and Gobarghata were reduced to rubble. "It was unbelievable. The terror struck like a lightning and the students had no chance to come out of the school," said Ram Pal, who was working on a nearby field at Baipatna. About 40 children were reported to be missing and feared dead. In Gobarghata school, the bodies of 14 pupils have been recovered from the debris.

The tornado killed more than 200 people, injured thousands, flattened hundreds of huts and left more than 10,000 homeless. The wind blowing at 200 km per hour uprooted trees and poles, butchered livestock and ravaged hundreds of acres of agricultural land

Meteorologists confirmed that it was a tornado. S.R. Kalsi, the deputy director-general of the Indian Meteorological Department, who is heading an investigation into the phenomenon, ruled out that it was a cyclonic storm, which develops over sea. In this case, the storm had developed over land.

However, this is not the first time that West Bengal and Orissa have been hit by twisters. They have wreaked havoc twice in the Eighties and twice in the Nineties. The last time it happened in 1993, at Kandi in Murshidabad, more than 60 people were killed.

Meanwhile, a central team led by Union steel minister Naveen Patnaik visited the affected areas. The central and the state governments have announced compensation for the victims and their families. But as usual, the relief work under the supervision of the district authorities has created controversy.

With panchayat polls due in May, the CPI(M) is said to be using the relief material to win sympathy of the villagers. While the dazed villagers stand by, politics has taken the upper hand. Who said that nature is the great leveller? •

Arindam Sarkar/Calcutta

PHOTOGRAPHS: RAJIB BASU

HOMECOMING OF SORTS

Richard Celeste, the new US ambassador, has his roots in India

India is like home away from home for US ambassador Richard Celeste where he has old roots and even a second family. So, when President Bill Clinton rang him last year in Chicago to suggest that he take up the hot seat and steer an often difficult relationship, Celeste was ready. Fellow Democrats, Clinton and Celeste, had known each other from the time they were Governors of Arkansas and Ohio.

Low-key and restrained, Celeste arrived in New Delhi last November in time for secretary of state Madeleine Albright's visit. The "strategic dialogue" had just begun and there was hope in the air. American Cabinet members were landing in succession, having suddenly discovered India's potential. Celeste was happy to be the face of the new, more constructive US policy in New Delhi. He was familiar with the country, had a direct connection to scores of Indians and Indian Americans and was ready to lift the relationship to "a higher level".

But as a lifelong politician, the new ambassador also knew that he faced a hugely difficult task. He was now in a country where being an American can be a controversy in itself as he found out recently when he was criticised for merely stating the US policy on the nuclear question. Some bristling media reports quickly admonished him for daring to comment on India's right to exercise the nuclear option — something that he did not do. Neither was he responding to the BJP manifesto as some reports claimed because his comments were made before the release of the document. The ministry of external affairs commented sternly as reporters clamoured for blood.

In a way, it was Celeste's initiation ceremony for no US ambassador has escaped the wrath of the Indian media where even a "no comment" can spark lengthy editorials. He is taking it in his stride while building bridges to India

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DIPLOMACY

through the business community and the political leadership. He and his wife, Jacqueline — a vivacious and lively person — have already made trips to southern and western India, dined with the powerful and supped with the glitzy, including the Ambanis.

He is currently in an observation mode, listening and learning since as he says "My India is 30 years old," referring to his days as a young aide to Chester Bowles who was ambassador to India in the Fifties.

Celeste is going about it methodically, meeting senior editors and bureaucrats, retired Indian diplomats and politicians from various parties to discuss the ins and outs of the bumpy relationship. Some of these "let's-get-acquainted" lunches have led to columns and in a recent one by former foreign secretary J.N. Dixit, Celeste says he was again misquoted about making Iraq an example for other countries with weapons of mass destruction.

A little frustrated by his initial run-ins with the press, he is confident that the wrinkles will smoothen in time. The MEA is all praise for the ambassador and a senior Indian official said Celeste was "warm and skillful". He also has old friendships in India going back decades, that may surprise some.

In fact, Celeste is the adopted son of a prominent Indian family he befriended during his first tour. They kept in touch over the years and attended each other's family functions.

His officers — all fans of his predecessor Frank Wisner and his legendary access — were taken aback a bit when they realised that Celeste personally knew Inder Kumar Gujral, the former Prime Minister.

During the meetings with Albright, Gujral referred to the new ambassador as "Dick" in a familiar fashion. The story goes that it was Gujral's personal nod to the protocol police at the MEA to allow Celeste to accompany Albright to the meetings even before he had presented his credentials. It was a small favour to an old friend from 30 years ago, for this is how long the Gujrals have known Celeste who was then married to his first wife, Dagmar, with whom he has six children. Two of them were born in India.

Pointing to an early Satish Gujral in Roosevelt House, the ambassador's residence, Celeste recounted how he met the well-known sculptor and painter when

he was still an upcoming artist. Celeste was experiencing India first-hand and the two struck a friendship. Satish asked Celeste if he would like to meet his brother who was a politician. And there began a long association between the two families. Celeste recently attended a wedding reception for Satish's daughter.

Celeste's "people skills" are already being noticed — his kind notes, his drop-ins to officers' rooms and his easy manner are all appreciated. A US diplomat recounted how the new ambassador invited everyone at the embassy, including the Indian staff, to a "pizza party" to say hello. It is not a common occurrence for the entire staff to be invited since it numbers in the hundreds. For Christmas, Celeste and Jacqueline had a pot-luck and again invited the embassy staff. "It was the first time many of the spouses had been inside Roosevelt House and it was a tremendous gesture," recounted a happy attendee.

By now it is a familiar sight on the sprawling embassy compound to see Celeste taking his infant son, Samuel, for a stroll. True to form, the Christmas party by the new ambassador included fun stuff for the kids. Being a politician, he understands the symbolism of gestures.

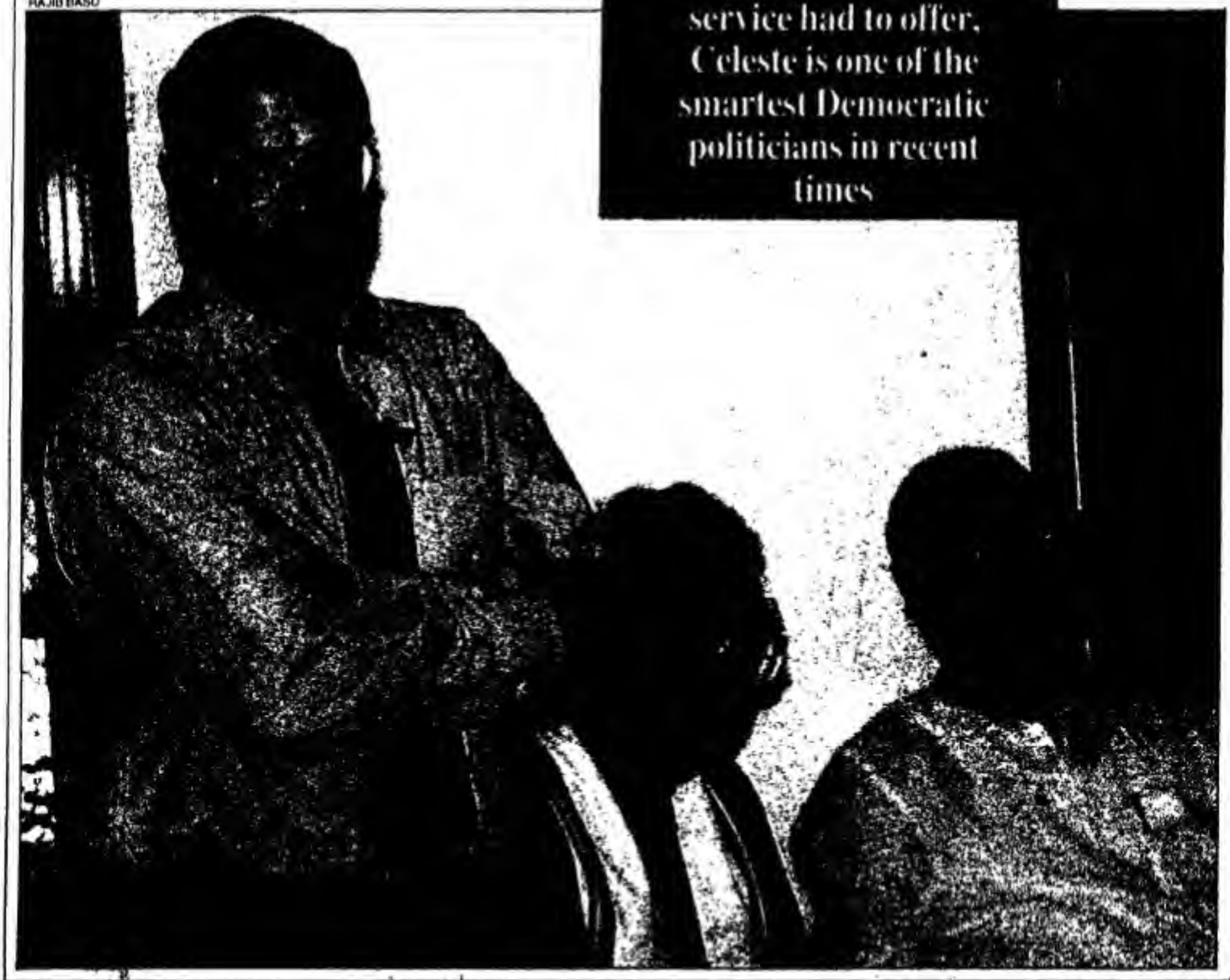
At his confirmation hearing in Washington, the famous Ohio Senator, John Glenn, was at hand to introduce Celeste to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee — a rare honour. At his swearing-in ceremony, it was the same story. Ohio Congressman Sherrod Brown and Senator Glenn along with many Indian Americans attended the reception in the state department.

Coordinating the party was Subodh Chandra, a young Indian American lawyer, who is specially grateful to Celeste for his "matrimonial services". In a typical Indian story, Chandra wanted to marry the love of his life but the girl's father was not impressed. Until, that is, Governor Celeste intervened and cajoled him into accepting the groom. The happy couple were special guests at Celeste's farewell dinner in Washington when an emotional ambassador bid a temporary goodbye to all his friends.

Jacqueline, who seems to have taken to India like fish to water, says she has already made some good friends and goes out to lunch regularly with them. The warm hospitality shown by Indian

If Frank Wisner was one of the best the American foreign service had to offer, Celeste is one of the smartest Democratic politicians in recent times

RAJIB BASU

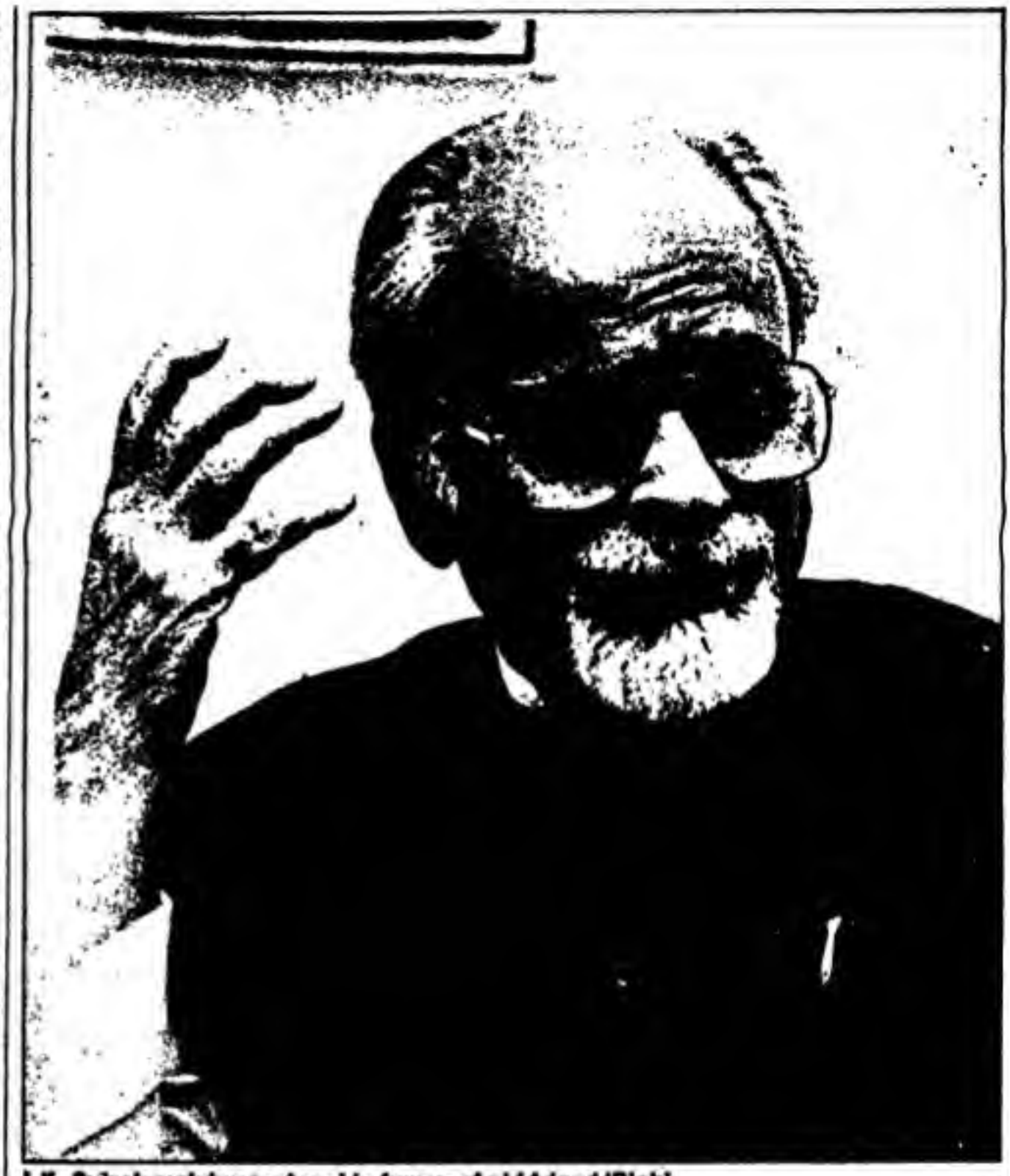


families has impressed her deeply and perhaps created a permanent fan. But Jacqueline, much younger than Celeste's 60, is also having fun, enjoying the glamour of Bombay and Delhi societies. She recalled being invited by the Ambani brothers and while sitting by the poolside she innocently asked which floor of the multi-storeyed building they resided in. And the answer was — all of them.

They have been to the much written about Shah residence where old masonry and woodwork have been replicated by master artisans. "I have been surprised by the scale of wealth here," says Jacqueline. The couple is easygoing and informal. Comparisons are often unfair but journalists and opinion makers who remember Wisner, are waiting for Celeste to "come out" in a bigger way. He presumably will now that a new government is in place.

While Wisner was "hyper" about working the phones and the people under him to near exhaustion, Celeste has a different style. If Wisner was one of the best the American foreign service had to offer, Celeste is one of the smartest Democratic politicians in recent times. A bit like the President who appointed him, he is a "cautious activist" who likes to change things for the greater good. "Wisner had a certain style, Celeste is more a man of the people. Both are extremely effective administratively," was a diplomat's assessment who has worked with both men. If Wisner was well connected within the bureaucracy, Celeste is plugged into the Democratic Party power structure.

The one big advantage that Celeste does have which even Wisner's most ardent fans cannot deny is the benefit of having the entire Clinton administration behind him for pushing the relationship forward, i.e., the strategic dialogue. While Wisner had to wrestle with certain unfriendly and pro-Pakistan but key state department types on a daily basis, Celeste has the broad support of Clinton and Albright to improve relations and raise India's profile in US foreign policy.



I.K. Gujral: waiving protocol in favour of old friend 'Dick'

To judge whether he can achieve this one only has to look at Celeste's past.

A Rhode scholar and a Yale University graduate, he has twice been the Governor of Ohio, one of the most important industrial states. It must be noted that a Governor in the United States is an elected official, akin to the chief minister of an Indian state. His tenure (1983-91) is best known for thrusting Ohio into the top five generators of new jobs from being dead last. He also presented a balanced Budget for eight years in a row — no mean achievement.

As Governor, he developed a special emphasis to help Ohio companies compete globally and focOs on science and technology as key to economic development. The Thomas Edison Centers in Ohio, where government, universities and industry cooperate in developing new applications of technology, have achieved recognition by the National Academy of Sciences in the United States.

He also worked on the social side of things, helping reduce drug and alcohol abuse and supporting the care of the elderly in the family instead of impersonal retirement homes. In 1989, he was honoured as the "Children's Governor of the Year" by the Child Welfare League of America in recognition of his efforts on behalf of children and mothers. For him, the family is one of the most important things and he says he admires the strong ties in Indian families.

Celeste's forte, however, is thinking of ideas to improve the economy and one can assume he would take special interest in improving commercial ties between India and the United States. A few years ago he had led a business delegation from Ohio to India, the first Governor to do so. As he gets into the swing of things in New Delhi, he will be helping US businessmen explore India's potential.

But one of the biggest tasks currently facing him is the upcoming trip to India by Clinton, the first in two decades. He will be judged by how well the visit goes in terms of both substance and style. Be sure he will be working hard to make it a success. •

Seema Sirohi/Washington

INDER MALHOTRA

Double role

Does the diplomatic process suffer when the PM heads the foreign office?

Atal Behari Vajpayee's decision to be his own foreign minister was not unexpected. Given his flair for foreign policy and grasp of international affairs, amply displayed during his stint as Morarji Desai's foreign minister in the 70s, this is likely to do the country some good. But a caveat must be entered. Combining these two exacting offices in one individual is not a sound practice in our times.

Jawaharlal Nehru's shining precedent is no longer valid. His times were different and more leisurely. Having prepared himself for the job all through his adult life, he was laying the foundations of the foreign policy of newly-Independent India — a policy which has stood the country in good stead for an astonishingly long period. In his days, diplomacy was a game confined to a limited number of nations.

Today this country has diplomatic dealings with close to 150 nations. The jet age has meant a constant toing and froing of foreign ministers. As the diplomatic community in Chanakyapuri would readily confirm, this process suffers when the foreign office is headed by the Prime Minister. Foreign ministers of rich and powerful countries tend to give New Delhi a wide berth.

Of course, all heads of government the world over do and must maintain tight control of the overarching foreign policy and conduct of foreign relations. Lal Bahadur Shastri had started by emulating Nehru and retaining the ministry of external affairs (MEA) under his own control. But in less than two months he handed this responsibility to Swaran Singh.

There is one thing infinitely worse than the Prime Minister being his own foreign minister. It is the pernicious practice that began in Indira Gandhi's time, especially in her second innings, of either not having a foreign minister worth the name and running the MEA through a trusted chairman of the Policy Planning Committee or appointing a series of foreign ministers in quick succession but ignoring them so completely as to make and run foreign policy behind their backs.

Rajiv "improved" upon mama's record and put the sidelining of his foreign ministers on public display by relying almost completely on a coterie of favoured, if able, officials, and sometimes assigning to RAW, the agency for foreign intelligence, a role that should never belong to it.

V RAJAGOPAL

Given his flair for foreign policy, Vajpayee's decision to be his own foreign minister is likely to do the country some good. But a caveat must be entered. Combining these two exacting offices in one individual is not a sound practice in our times

The irony of ironies, however, is that P.V. Narasimha Rao, the worst sufferer of the Indira-Rajiv style, on becoming Prime Minister in 1991, adopted it as his own. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that never before had the foreign office been reduced to such an abject adjunct of the PMO as during Rao's reign.

Mercifully, things improved visibly during Inder Gujral's tenure, first as foreign minister and then as PM and FM rolled into one. And there is every reason to believe that under a leader of Vajpayee's sagacity and sensitivity, the process will continue. It will also help that the principal secretary to the PM, Brajesh Mishra, is a foreign service veteran.

However, this is not enough. The institution of foreign office ought to be restored to its due importance and assigned its proper role. At the political level, there should be first a search for someone with Swaran Singh's potential and then a determined effort by all parties with an ambition to rule India to train younger members with necessary ability and aptitude as future foreign ministers. At the administrative and operational level, the coordination between the MEA, the ministry of defence, the home ministry in charge of internal security and economic ministries has got to be strengthened.

Vajpayee has done well to commit himself to undertaking a comprehensive Strategic Defence Review. A similar examination of the MEA's structure, practices, role and manpower is also overdue. •

RAJIV SHUKLA

Brewing trouble

BJP MPs resent the composition of the ministry

Serious resentment is brewing among the BJP MPs over the party high command's attitude towards ministry formation at the Centre. Several MPs have lodged their protest in a disciplined manner with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, party president L.K. Advani, vice-president Kushabhau Thakre and RSS veterans Rajender Singh alias Rajju Bhaiyya and K.C. Sudarshan.

Media reports speculating that many more ministers will be taken from the alliance partners as well as from the Telugu Desam Party and the National Conference have disappointed the BJP aspirants. Vajpayee would also like to keep some slots vacant for the Trinamul Congress, which may join the government in April.

A secret meeting of the BJP MPs belonging to the Bania caste took place at the residence of Ramdas Aggarwal, a Rajya Sabha member, and it was decided to lodge protest with the party leadership over the non-inclusion of Banias in the council of ministers. According to them, three ministers from the Kurmi community — Nitish Kumar, Santosh Gangwar and Ramesh Bains — have been accommodated in the government.

The names which are doing the rounds from the Bania community include Ramdas Aggarwal, Narendra Mohan and Vijay Goel. If the former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, Sunderlal Patwa, manages to get into the Rajya Sabha, he will also be staking his claim for a Cabinet berth.

Similarly, party MPs belonging to the Rajput caste are also unhappy over their non-representation in the government. Those in the race include Sanjay Singh, Rajnath Singh, Uttam Singh Pawar and Raja Manavendra Shah, among others. Former deputy minister of finance in the Chandra Shekhar government, Digvijay Singh, is also in the run from the Samata Party.

Most of the MPs are upset over the magnanimity of the party leadership in giving ministerial berths to alliance partners. According to them, allies are being allowed over-representation and they are trying to blackmail the BJP. From Tamil Nadu alone, Jayalalitha has taken six key portfolios of petroleum & natural gas, surface transport, revenue, banking & insurance, law & company affairs, health and personnel. Defence and railways have gone to the Samata Party. Steel & mines and coal have gone to the Biju Janata Dal. Independents have also been given either Cabinet ranks or independent charges.

The Prime Minister is likely to expand his Cabinet during the Budget session of Parliament and may induct 25 more ministers. Now allies are again seeking some quota for the minister of state slots. Apart from this, Vajpayee would like to keep some key positions vacant for the Telugu Desam, the National Conference, the Trinamul Congress, the Haryana Lok Dal and for the MPs who may defect from the Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Samajwadi Party or the Republican Party of India.

In this situation, there is not much scope for the BJP MPs to be accommodated in good number. People like Shatrughan Sinha, a star campaigner of the party apart from Vajpayee and Advani, and giant-killers Sartaj Singh and Sanjay Singh who defeated Arjun Singh and Capt. Satish Sharma respectively have been ignored so far. This has demoralised the MPs. Among the women, Sumitra Mahajan and Rita Verma are under active consideration. There is also some dissent over the denigration of Ram Naik who was keen to be a minister with Cabinet rank. Resentment is also being shown over the inclusion of the sons of various leaders. •

Vajpayee is likely to expand his Cabinet during the Budget session and may induct 25 more ministers. Now allies are again seeking some quota for the minister of state slots

Life after

Will the CPI(M) in Kerala hold together without the ideological bonding provided by Namboodiripad?

The CPI(M) in Kerala has been orphaned by the death of its patriarch, Elamkulam Manakkal Sankaran Namboodiripad EMS was one of the most important revolutionaries from the state and the architect of India's first land reforms. What makes Kerala a distinct entity with improved human relations has a lot to do with the life and philosophy of EMS. Cutting across party lines, he was the only leader who had genuine support at the grass-roots level. His concern for the poor and for a better tomorrow for them never dimmed a shade.

Namboodiripad shaped Kerala's politics for over six decades and was a frame of social and intellectual reference. Often it was what he said that set the tone of political discourse. He was the unquestioned leader of the CPI(M) till his death.

Those who did not agree with his ideological stance ended up in the political wilderness like the former rebels, M.V. Raghavan and K.R. Gowri. He ruled the party with an iron hand from 1964 to 1991 before V.S. Achuthanandan marginalised his influence within the organisation.

At the time of his death, Namboodiripad was trying to check the growing groupism in the party. Rival factions were preparing for a showdown over the "unexpected" setbacks that some of the party candidates had suffered in the recent Lok Sabha elections and the "capture of power" by the Achuthanandan faction at the CPI(M)'s Palakkad state conference in January.

Namboodiripad was trying his best to see that the party does not split into the CITU group led by Politburo member E. Balanandan, central committee members M.M. Lawrence and K.N. Ravindranath versus Achuthanandan. It was a difficult job and EMS was trying to play neutral though his heart was with the CITU lobby.

Now, Achuthanandan wants to confront his CITU colleagues with a whole set of allegations regarding their "role" in the defeat of the party nominees in the Alappuzha, Ernakulam and Mukundapuram seats.

Namboodiripad has definitely left a void that cannot be filled. And all these years his only failure has been that he has not built a strong second rung of leadership, especially among the younger lot

The Alappuzha district committee has issued show-cause notices to former MP T.J. Anjalose, former district secretariat member T.K. Palani and a few others for their perceived anti-party activities. In Ernakulam, an inquiry has been initiated against some CITU leaders for having remained silent during the election campaign.

These happenings, both covert and overt, are now in the domain of public knowledge thanks to bulletins being issued by the 'Save CPI(M) forum', clearly a group owing allegiance to the CITU faction. Written in a question-

EMS

answer format, these bulletins are intend-
ed to expose the "anti-party conspiracy
of a power-hungry minority that hijack-
ed the Palakkad conference".

The bulletin says that Achuthanandan
had struck out CITU members from the
PC (provincial committee) so that his
group could win. CITU had warned par-
ty general secretary Harkishen Singh
Surjeet and other Politburo members
about Achuthanandan's dirty-tricks
department working overtime.

A few days before Namboodiripad's
death, Achuthanandan had told him that
some kind of action had to be taken
against the CITU men in the party. Nam-
boodiripad asked him to go slow on it

Beyond politics

EMS will be remembered more for his social reform initiatives

More than anything, EMS will always be remembered as one of the pioneers of social reforms in Kerala.

The man who ended up debunking Hindutva was born a Brahmin who started his life with a study of the Vedas. Along with V.T. Bhattadhiripad, he played an active role in the Yoga Kshema Sabha, an organisation set up by Brahmin youth in the early Thirties to fight against the retrograde customs that prevailed in the community. He said he wanted "to make Namboodiris men" by doing away with their obscurantism and forcing them to allow remarriage of widows.

Namboodiripad was among those who were convinced that reforms had to come from within the community and through demonstrative actions. The way he changed the face of the Brahmin community was exemplary. A leader was born that day and he remained a leader till his death. EMS emphasised the importance of cultural reforms and saw to it as an integral component of political regeneration.

He wrote: "To empower people meant not just to give them land or jobs but also to alter their cultural notions and values." Namboodiripad did not repent when the Brahmin community excommunicated him and when his mother died, he wasn't allowed near her funeral pyre.

But for millions of the downtrodden in Kerala he was sort of a messiah — a man who gave them justice when he was the first elected communist chief minister in 1957. He championed land reforms which eventually led to the dismantling of the feudal order in the state.

Of course, EMS invited the wrath of the landed gentry and fellow Brahmins even today curse him for depriving them of their vast estates. This he did despite his coming from a family of *janmis* or traditional landlords. It was a model which other Left governments in the country chose to follow.

Namboodiripad's first ministry also sought to bring about far-reaching reforms in the education system, provoking violent reactions, especially from the church and the Nair community which then controlled the schools and colleges in Kerala.

This was the cause of the "liberation struggle" launched by the church and the Nairs in 1959, which led to the dismissal of his government by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Historians will remember it as the first use of Article 356 of the Constitution to remove a democratically elected state government.

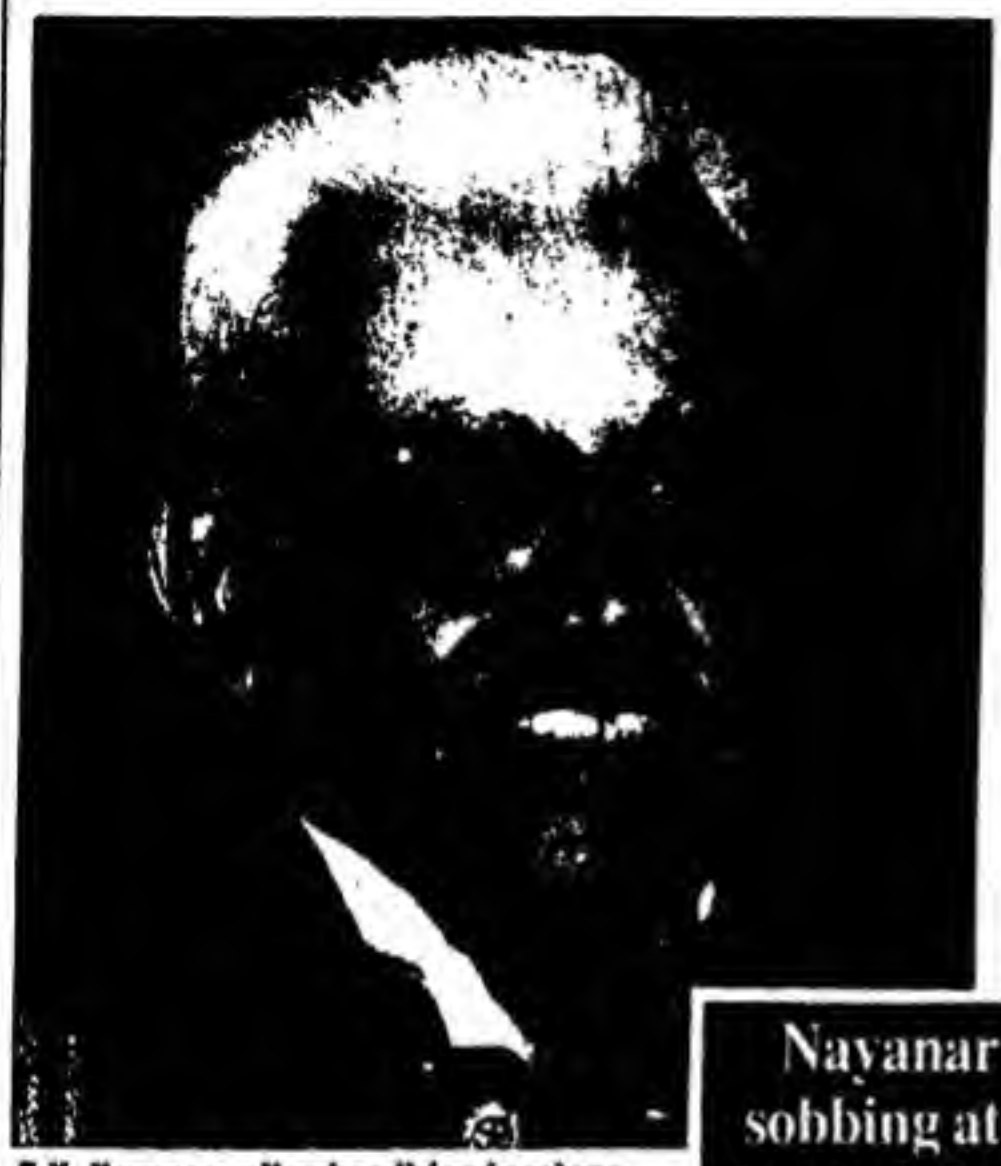
In the Sixties, he declared that he would "ally with the devil to defeat

Jawaharlal Nehru: dismissed the first elected communist government

the Congress," which then represented the ruling class. And thus by 1967, his second government was the first political coalition in the real sense, embracing even the Muslim League. In more than one way Namboodiripad is the father of coalition politics, every party is trying to adopt. During his second term in office, he tried to decentralise the administration in a big way.

A 100 years from now histprians will remember Namboodiripad more for the reforms on the agrarian front marked by the abolition of landlordism, the advent of land ceiling and land for the landless, the recognition of trade union rights and the revolutionary Education Act that ensured salaries from the government for teachers in private institutions.

Above all, EMS changed the lifestyle and commitments of the poorest of the poor and made them aware of their rights as human beings.



E.K. Nayanar: a Namboodiripad protege

V.S. Achuthanandan: will he fill the void?

Nayanar was seen sobbing at his guru's funeral. It was EMS's tacit support that gave him the 'great survivor' image. Now it's bound to be a collective leadership, with Achuthanandan's stamp of approval

and Surjeet urged him to bury the hatchet.

But Achuthanandan wanted immediate action. At the CPI(M) state committee meeting, which ended two days before EMS died, Achuthanandan wanted to take action against CITU which he believed had helped K. Karunakaran win the Trivandrum Lok Sabha seat.

Meanwhile, chief minister E.K. Nayanar, a Namboodiripad protege, was seen sobbing at his guru's funeral. It was Namboodiripad's tacit support within the party that helped Nayanar become chief minister three times and gave him the 'great survivor' image.

Namboodiripad also protected him from the veiled attacks of Achuthanandan. After the Palakkad conference where Achuthanandan neutralised the CITU, his next target was Nayanar. And when Achuthanandan became the Left Democratic Front convener, he also became the de facto chief minister.

The irony of it is that after EMS' demise, Achuthanandan will find it even more difficult to dislodge Nayanar. After Namboodiripad, Nayanar is perhaps the only CPI(M) leader with a mass following.

The question being asked now is who will take over as the chief ideologue of the party after Namboodiripad?

Said a veteran CPI(M) leader: "The ideology and the party line which has to be followed on any issue or matter was dictated by EMS. There is no replacement for Namboodiripad as his viewpoint prevailed and even his detractors fell in line."

It is said that Politburo member S. Ramachandran Pillai, youth leader M.A. Baby or even EMS's son E.M. Sreedharan Namboodiripad might dictate the party line in future. It is bound to be a collective leadership, with Achuthanandan's stamp of approval.

A few days before he died, Namboodiripad had started writing an article in the party organ, where he calls for a better understanding with the Congress in view of the BJP's ascent to power. He was trying to lay the ground for a future coalition of the Left and the Congress even in Kerala where they are pitted against each other. All top Congress leaders including A.K. Antony were present at his funeral.

And even CPI(M) leaders like Nayanar and Achuthanandan have toned down their attack on the Congress. The CPI(M) in Kerala is reconciled to the idea that if it has to fight the BJP at the national level, it will have to work out an understanding with the Congress.

The problem now is to how to go about it, especially to tell the cadres that "to defeat the BJP we have to join hands with our traditional enemy — the Congress". If EMS was alive, he, through his dialectical diction, would have convinced them about it.

Namboodiripad has definitely left a void that cannot be filled. It will not be easy for Nayanar and Achuthanandan to run a party which employs thousands and has assets over Rs 100 crore. And all these years the only failure of Namboodiripad has been that he has not built a strong second rung of leadership, especially among the younger lot.

Today, the CPI(M) leadership is dominated by men who are over 70 and still believe in red dreams and experimenting with revolution. Even the central leadership is worried about the future of the party in Kerala where intense groupism prevails. •

Sreedhar Pillai/Trivandrum

D P. SINHA

EMS with Jyoti Basu (left): agreed to disagree

Left without legacy

The CPI(M) in West Bengal mourns E.M.S. Namboodiripad's death. But that's just about all

Never before was the CPI(M) in such a fix. The BJP has finally come to power at the Centre, the United Front has virtually disintegrated, and the Congress, with its future not so bright anymore, has, as its last resort, chosen Sonia Gandhi as its president. And making the scenario all the more depressing for the CPI(M) is the death of E.M.S. Namboodiripad, a political stalwart and the party's most respected theoretician.

But the absence of EMS the theoretician is unlikely to make a difference to the CPI(M)'s powerful West Bengal unit. For the last one decade, EMS had been reduced to a mere figurehead not only as far as the West Bengal unit was concerned but also at A.K.G. Bhavan, the party's headquarters in Delhi. The factions within the party used his name only when it suited them.

There are several instances of EMS being disregarded or overruled by the party. At one point, when he advocated an alliance with Muslim League factions in Kerala, there were few takers at the national level. Again, when he supported Jyoti Basu's candidature for prime ministership in 1996 in the CPI(M) politburo, the party's ruling clique refused to pay heed. And, when he ultimately did change his mind on the issue, his revised view was systematically publicised.

Though respected, EMS was never widely debated in West Bengal. For the last one decade, his attention was focused mainly on Kerala, and this became all the more so after he gave up the party's general secretaryship and returned to his home state. Although he carried on reading and writing, age was not on his side. And his influence was certainly on the decline, especially in West Bengal. Jyoti Basu differed with him on many matters — their relationship was one of mutual respect and competition at the realm of ideas. Other West Bengal CPI(M) leaders such as Biman Basu and Anil Biswas — both central committee members — toed EMS' line only when it suited them. And then there were those who never really bothered about what EMS said.

This attitude is quite in keeping with the CPI(M)'s character. Only a handful of partymen in Kerala, for example, cared for Jyoti Basu's plea to join the government at the Centre. This is because the CPI(M) has had great regional leaders like EMS and Jyoti Basu who reached the pinnacle of their political careers only as local heavyweights

exerting their influence at the national level. But it has always lacked a truly national leader holding sway over all units of the party. This probably partly explains why the CPI(M) has not yet been able to decide on a national line.

In fact, the communists had vainly searched for one even in the pre-Independence days. In the post-Independence period, too, they met with little success. This led to confusion, acrimonious debates, the splitting of the party, and its gradual decline in Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and elsewhere.

During the 50 years since Independence, the Marxists have failed to determine what their relationship with the Congress should be. For decades, hardliners within the CPI(M) had been hoping that the Congress would weaken one day, and when their dreams did begin to come true in recent years, the benefit was reaped by the BJP. Now, the CPI(M) is on the verge of branding the BJP as its "main enemy".

Earlier, when Saifudding Chowdhury — a young leader from West Bengal — pointed out the problems with the party's rabidly anti-Congress policy, he was unceremoniously dropped from the central committee. The action against him was taken after EMS and Basu nodded in agreement. But recent political developments have vindicated Chowdhury's stand.

Even in a party dominated by regional 'lords', EMS was the first to realise the danger posed by 'communal forces'. Way back in 1979, the CPI(M) had decided to withdraw support to the Morarji Desai government on the issue of dual membership. EMS sensed that the RSS was trying to gain control of the Janata Party. At that time, the concept of Hindutva hadn't yet become a social force.

PRADIP BHATIA

Saifuddin Chowdhury: stand vindicated

In the last 50 years, the Marxists have failed to determine their relationship with the Congress. For decades, CPI(M) hardliners had been hoping that the Congress would weaken one day. And when their dreams began to come true, the benefit was reaped by the BJP

but EMS, with his enormous foresight, was quick to realise the danger. It was he who had dubbed the Congress and the BJP as 'cholera' and 'plague'.

The West Bengal unit of the CPI(M) was in those days dominated by Pramod Dasgupta and Jyoti Basu. Dasgupta supported EMS in the central committee and others followed. Basu tried to intervene, but it was too late. The Morarji government was dislodged. However, the debate within the party continued. Basu succeeded in convincing his comrades in West Bengal that the Congress was the main danger — a perception that came to be known as the Bengal Line. It is an irony of history that one-and-a-half decades later, when the BJP emerged as the real 'danger', EMS and Basu switched positions.

All through the United Front's term in office at the Centre, Basu was in favour of closely coordinating with the Congress, while EMS stuck to his line of maintaining equidistance from the Congress and the BJP. In fact, at the CPI(M)'s Chandigarh congress, general secretary Harkishen Singh Surjeet had himself advocated that the BJP should be identified as the 'main enemy'. But EMS and his followers opposed the line.

In pleading for closer ties with the Congress, Basu was, in fact, taking a national view of the current political situation, but EMS' compulsions lay in the political reality of Kerala. Some West Bengal leaders, too, supported EMS — again — because of their regional interests. But the election to the 12th Lok Sabha has changed the situation is West Bengal as well.

Now, the Trinamul Congress and BJP alliance has emerged as an effective challenger to the CPI(M) in West Bengal. Therefore, it may not be difficult for Basu to convince his party colleagues in the state to shed their anti-Congressism.

In the coming days, the CPI(M) will be under pressure to solve its regional problems. Says a central committee member, "We realised the danger posed by communal forces. Now they are in power in Delhi. We could do little. And compounding our problem is the fact that regional compulsions are different in West Bengal and Kerala. How the party will solve this problem is anybody's guess."

In West Bengal, the Trinamul-BJP combine is expected to put up a stiff fight in the next Assembly election due in 2001. At the all-India level, too, the party is under political compulsions to strike a deal with the Congress in order to thwart the BJP. But the ground realities in the CPI(M)-ruled states of Kerala and Tripura are different. So, it will still be difficult for the CPI(M) to arrive at a uniform national formulation.

This is where EMS failed. He could not strengthen the party by leading any all-India movements and spreading its influence in states beyond its traditional strongholds. This is where Jyoti Basu, too, has failed (or, maybe, he did not try at all). And faced with conflicting realities in Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura — three states from where the party draws its sustenance — the CPI(M) is left rudderless. •

Diptendra Rayachowdhuri/Calcutta

For the people

The second NAPM conference seeks to fuse popular movements

It was just another coalition exercise. The second conference of the National Alliance of People's Movement (NAPM) held in Hyderabad last fortnight came to one simple conclusion: the coalescence of all such movements.

"There would be wider and intersectoral coordination between movements of peasants, Dalits, tribals, fishworkers, women and backward castes and classes," said Thomas Kocheri, national president of the fish workers association. Environmentalist Medha Patkar, one of the convenors, made her point too. In her report, she claimed that people's movements had gained momentum over the last decade. The anti-GATT rallies of 1993 and the conference on regional displacement and development in 1995 — with tours through 55 places in 14 states — had provided the thrust to popular struggles, said Patkar.

Inaugurated by septuagenarian *sarvodaya* leader Siddharaj Daddha, the conference was attended by nearly 200 delegates from 75 organisations in 13 states. In a sense, Hyderabad had to be the venue. Andhra Pradesh has not only seen Dalit and agro-labourers' agitations, it has also witnessed multinationals trying to muscle in into aqua and handloom sectors.

But even as the conference chalked out a programme for conducting a *janadhikar panchayat* in Delhi on 27-28 April, the NAPM is still hamstrung by contradictory ideologies, agendas and strategies. A common refrain among the delegates was: state-level processes may have been successful, but there wasn't any regional and national-level strategy yet. The alliance, they stressed, needed to involve individuals from all walks — lawyers, academicians, journalists, scientists and professionals.

A word about its main agendas. The Andhra government's Nandavanam project was discussed at length. The project which displaced nearly 20,000 people living on the banks of the river Musi, divides old and new Hyderabad. The NAPM extended its support to People's Initiative, an organisation fighting for the evicted residents.

Several welfare activists working in slums and for women's uplift also spoke. Madras-based Gabriele Dietrich and Lata P.M. argued that lopsided representation of women in both politics and economy had caused social imbalance. On the issue of granting mining licences, the NAPM contended that even public sector companies should not be given mining leases in forests and tribal areas. Dr K.R. Datye, a water and land management expert, stressed on the need for *jal-urja-swavalamban*, projecting a new green world with proper utilisation of solar energy, wastelands and women power.

The conference, in a sense, was a success as the convenors adopted several political and economic resolutions. One of them criticised the government's policy of setting up power plants at the cost of ecology. "To generate one MW power, one acre of land in Singrauli had to be cleared," it observed. Another one was on the lifting of prohibition in Andhra Pradesh which, it claimed, had a 'devastating' impact on rural women in particular. The TDP government, said Thomas Kocheri, had erred in withdrawing its ban on Indian-manufactured foreign liquor. The conference also appealed to the people to reject the use of iodised salt.

The conference, however, deferred any decision on the issue of a separate statehood for Telengana. It however resolved to campaign against Enron's alleged forays in the south in the field of thermal and nuclear power.

In her report, Medha Patkar said that the 1993 anti-GATT rallies and the 1995 conference on regional displacement and development were proof that people's movements had gained momentum over the last decade

One point the Hyderabad conference made clear was on the issue of political participation. The NAPM had no particular interest in electoral politics. But if any of the associate members were keen to contest the polls, the NAPM would give its support. The moot point was: it was necessary to have pro-people intervention in politics. And that, the government should not make any national or international agreement involving air, water and forest without the consent of the people. •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

SPECIAL REPORT

KNOCK OUT

The United Front suffers a body blow as Chandrababu Naidu and Farooq Abdullah bail the BJP out

The cause was noble, the issues at stake relevant and the intentions crystal clear. And yet despite the strong convictions and compelling reasons that had brought it together, the United Front (UF) failed to stay united. Ostensibly formed to keep the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) out, the Front collapsed like a house of cards when it was finally faced with the BJP challenge.

Chandrababu Naidu, Andhra Pradesh chief minister and the former convenor of the UF was the first to walk out and vote in favour of the BJP during the vote-of-confidence. Now, though the base of the United Front has widened, with the new-found and tentative friendship of Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav, there are misgivings among another section of the Front, the CPI, on this new hegemony of Yadavs.

In fact, with the presence of the United Front, the National Front having gone over to the BJP in almost its entirety, it is hard to see how a grouping like the UF can prevent further desertions from its ranks.

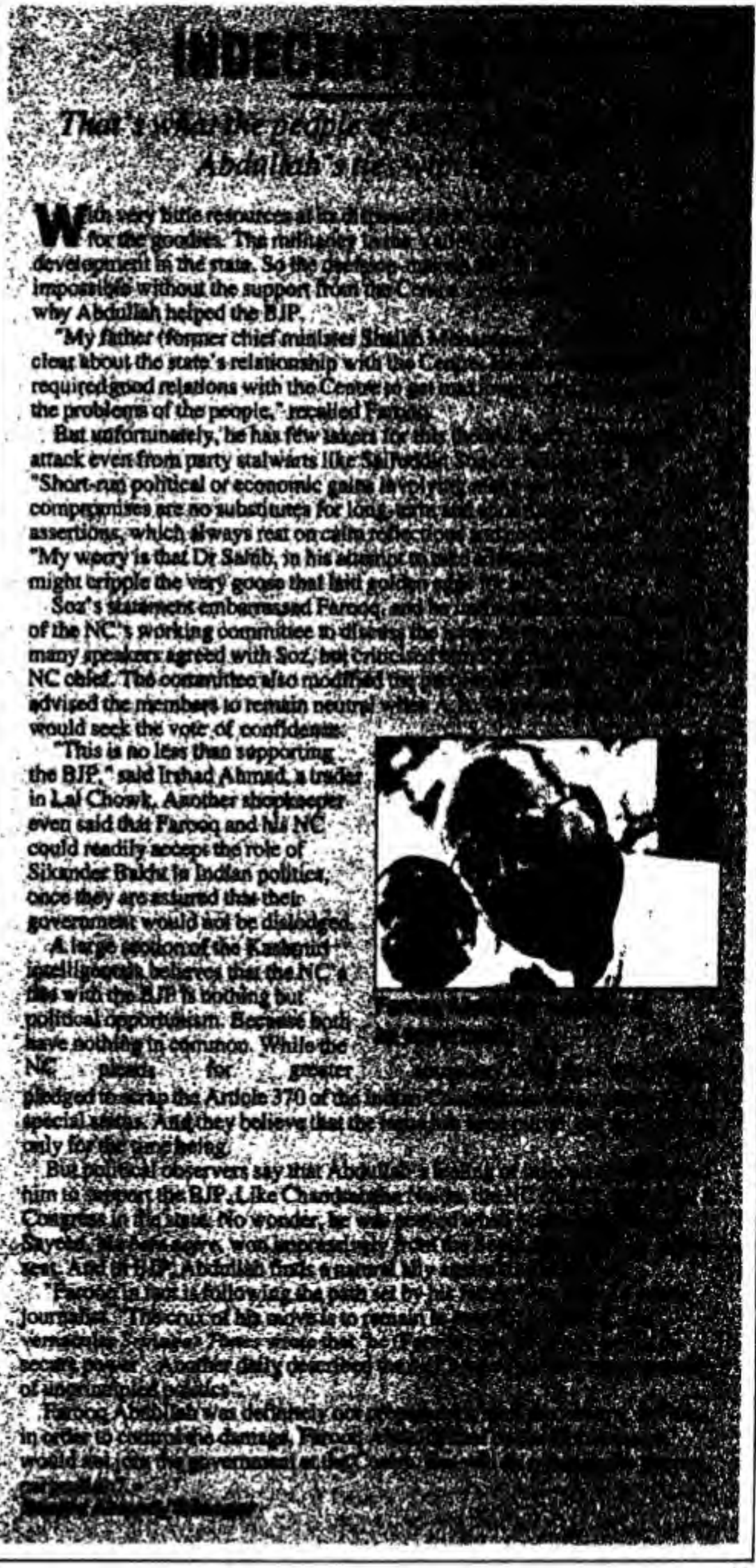
What Naidu did with a hurt look, Farooq Abdullah did with impertinence. A day before the BJP government sought the vote of confidence, the UF's core committee held a meeting to discuss the formation of an anti-communal front. Jammu and Kashmir chief minister and the chief of the Nation-

The UF leaders attending a steering committee meeting before the polls

al Conference, Farooq Abdullah, devoted much of his speech to how he combated communalism by his friendship with Hindi movie actress and Rajya Sabha member, Shabana Azmi. "I took her around on my motorbike," he told bemused core committee members.

Most members are more annoyed with Abdullah's attitude than Naidu's doublespeak. "Naidu did not have the political stamina. But then he has a lot at stake in Andhra Pradesh," argued a senior leader and former minister. "But in Abdullah, you see obvious signs of degeneration," he added disapprovingly.

Chandrababu Naidu is preparing for Assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh. "It is the Congress I have to fight at the state level not the BJP," Naidu explained his dilemma. Considering the Congress as the real enemy in the state, Naidu could not have gone with the Congress. And funds for the state were at



A PRISONER OF CIRCUMSTANCES

Prafulla Mahanta has only two options: support the BJP government or perish

Immediately after the Atal Behari Vajpayee government won the vote of confidence in Parliament, chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta declared that the state government alone cannot solve the problem of insurgency and hoped that the new BJP government at the Centre would take positive steps to solve the insurgency problem in Assam. Thus, in the state Assembly debate on 29 March, Mahanta made his intentions very clear: he expected the Vajpayee government to control insurgency in Assam and bring peace.

But significantly, Mahanta has not received any positive signals on the issue of insurgency from the state BJP unit. On the contrary, the local BJP outfit seems more concerned about the issue of infiltration of foreigners into the state.

For instance, immediately after his return from Delhi, the state BJP president, Narayan Borkatoky, said that both the Prime Minister and the Union home minister have assured him that they are keen for the development of Assam and other parts of the north-eastern region. But there was no mention of 'insurgency'. This caught the attention of Mahanta.

Prafulla Kumar Mahanta: survival tactics.

Also, so far, Mahanta hasn't received any support from the local BJP outfit to deal with the AASU. Recently, Mahanta got worried when he heard the news that some members of the AASU might join the BJP. According to the state BJP president, Narayan Barkatoky, he had a 'man-to-man' discussion with some of the leaders of the AASU on the issue of infiltration. This wasn't good news for Mahanta.

As far as Mahanta is concerned, the immediate problem that the new BJP-led coalition government will need to attend to is the growing insurgency in the state. So last week, chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta left for a two-day visit to Delhi to meet Prime Minister Vajpayee and defence minister George Fernandes and apprise them of the situation in Assam.

This visit is very crucial for Mahanta because unless he gets assurance of central support from the Vajpayee government to tackle insurgency in Assam, he would lose the confidence of his partymen and face problems at home. After all, even today, many Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) ministers and MLAs still consider themselves to be United Front members. What's more, they even question Mahanta's decision to leave the UF and support the BJP.

But political analysts say that Mahanta has very little options but to go with the BJP at the Centre. First, Mahanta is facing challenge to his leadership in the AGP from his own partymen. Secondly, his political career could well get jeopardised if the BJP-led coalition government at the Centre decides to open the LoC scam file. And finally, under no circumstances, Mahanta would allow AASU to strike a deal with the BJP, because this could upset the AGP hold in the state. So Mahanta is desperately hoping that the BJP-led government will bail him out. •

Dilip Chandan/Guwahati

stake, it only made sense to support the BJP-led government at the Centre.

Farooq Abdullah though a representative of the minorities decided to extend 'issue-based support' to the BJP and abstained during the vote of confidence to work for a better Centre-state relationship. And now both have been branded 'traitors' within the Front.

But inner-party squabbles apart, the crucial question is whether the United Front has any future or not?

And now the diehard United Front optimists talk about survival. "The United Front will never become irrelevant," says Jaipal Reddy of the Janata Dal. "It is a group of parties which believes in secularism and social justice. The Front is also a group that ideologically and politically does not fit in either with the BJP or the Congress," he added.

Reddy's definition spells out the Front's agenda well but unfortunately it does not hold true anymore.

While Laloo Yadav, the wayward Janata Dal leader has returned to the Front and has also patched up with old rival Mulayam Singh Yadav, the two loud voices within the Front are both Congress inclined. "I will shake hands with the devil to kill the demon," Mulayam had said in the past. As far as he is concerned, there is just one issue in politics today — how to keep the BJP out.

The United Front is now reduced to a patchwork of parties ready to go whichever way their regional interests can be guarded the best, something which the BJP has noted, for reasons of its own.

"The UF would have had a role to play if they would have continued with their pro-poor stand," says BJP general secretary, Govindacharya. "But the fact that they are so obsessed with political negativism has led to this situation that they have reduced to mean anything."

This seems to be one problem that the UF has not been able to combat. Lacking parliamentary majority each time, it was able to rule with BJP's support in 1989-90 and with the Congress support in 1996-97.

"The UF edifice was upholding secular values. The edifice and values were not false but somehow the commitment was not strong enough," explains Samajwadi Party general secretary Amar Singh. "All this is part of the purification of the United Front," he added.

The process of churning already seems to have begun. With the Tamil

Maanila Congress making all the right noises about returning to its parent party — the Congress — only Mulayam and Laloo seem to be ready to keep the Front alive.

Janata Dal has nearly been wiped out and the two big states where the United Front has given some stiff competition to the BJP are Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. With Chandra Shekhar acting as the umbrella (one-man) outfit, Laloo and Mulayam's proximity can be explained to their good old days as young socialists fighting it out together.

Like in the past the socialist forces that comprise mainly regional chieftains will go for another round of reorganisation and new political configurations. The space that has been vacated by the Janata Dal now seems to be occupied by the Samajwadi party.

And the new United Front which was formed with a single motive of keeping the BJP out has three constituents still, that are never likely to join hand with the latter.

Samajwadi Party has all along been fighting the BJP at state level. Seen as the saviour of the minorities, Yadav is one person who will never compromise on his secular credentials. Laloo Prasad Yadav, the former chief minister of Bihar has seen the worst time of his life

Laloo Prasad Yadav, Mulayam Singh Yadav and H.S. Surjeet: can they save the United Front?

The new UF which was formed with a single motive of keeping the BJP out has three constituents still — the SP, the RJD and the Left Front — that are unlikely to join hand with the BJP

only because of the BJP's Bihar unit. The BJP was the one to raise hell over Laloo's involvement in the fodder scam.

The only other constituent to support the two are the Left parties. Harkishen Surjeet, the CPM general secretary's proximity with Mulayam is no secret. With a common cause to fight the BJP, the Left parties have been with Mulayam all along.

However, even for the survival of the UF, what is now important is to see how this new front vibes with the Congress led by Sonia Gandhi. It would help if the Congress were to make capital of the strongly centralist formation that the BJP is, and woo back the anti-BJP forces to their rightful political fulcrum. The way to lure back allies would be to make strong statements that the Congress will always respect smaller parties, their federal and regional aspirations, and will barricade them to protect them from the centralising tendencies of the BJP.

It is hard to see if the United Front understands this, and will be able to respond to the overtures made by the Congress. As of now, Laloo and Mulayam have begun the process by starting to make the right noises in Parliament. Maybe, they need to scream a little louder — 10 Janpath has not heard them yet. •

Anuja Pande/New Delhi

To hell with you

Chandrababu Naidu had his own reasons to leave the United Front

For the first time, in the last two years, House No. 1310 on Jubilee Hills in Hyderabad became a prohibited zone for the media between 2—3 March, 1998. The official residence of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) supremo and chief minister Chandrababu Naidu wore a gloomy look as poll results poured in. The results were upsetting not only for the TDP, but also for its United Front (UF) partners.

But, it was Naidu who was singled out by the UF leaders and was attacked by his former political partners for the TDP's performance in AP: a development that cost the UF heavily during the vote-of-confidence on the floor of the House for the BJP government. Naidu's decision to support the BJP didn't happen overnight. The TDP leaders say the process began immediately after the poll results were out. The former UF convenor was battered by his poll partners. The Left Front leaders said that "the poll debacle in AP was a reaction against the anti-poor policies of the TDP". The Congress described the results to be "a vote against incumbancy".

Initially, Naidu didn't react. But the TDP leaders claimed that the split in the anti-Congress votes in favour of the BJP had sealed their fate in both coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema. The 20 per cent of the votes polled by the BJP affected the Congress in at least 12 parliamentary segments and the TDP in 16. "Perhaps, our CM's pre-electoral speeches on yet another coalition government frightened the people, and they moved towards the BJP, away from the fractured UF and the Congress," explained A. Madhav Reddy, the TDP minister for home.

The TDP leaders feel, though most of the UF partners suffered defeat in the polls, the Left Front which performed relatively well against the BJP could have prevented Naidu from leaving the UF. "It was the Left parties which drove Naidu out of the UF into the lap of the BJP," said Tulsidas, a senior TDP leader.

Although Naidu didn't react much to the snide remarks made by Deve Gowda, the UF steering committee chairman, it was the action of the CPI(M) that peeved him. The CPI(M)'s decision to support a Congress-led government at the Centre and agreeing to support the party's candidate for the Speaker's post agitated Naidu. And when Sitaram Yechury described Naidu's "equidistance" and "neutrality" as an "indirect support to the BJP", it was the last straw.

Political analysts say, Naidu would have stayed on had the CPI(M) general secretary, Harkishen Singh Surjeet, and Sitaram Yechury took a considerate stand. Both Surjeet and Yechury made far-fetched demands on Naidu. And their threatening gestures made Naidu

H.S. Surjeet with Chandrababu Naidu: friends no more

Naidu realises that the BJP is coming up as an alternative to the Congress in AP. Moreover, in the last two years, the BJP has emerged as the most important anti-Congress force in the south

more angry. "It was an insult to the Telugu pride," said Naidu.

The TDP chief now looked for an excuse to part with the UF. And this opportunity came when Naidu was informed that the core committee of the UF had met in Delhi without inviting him.

After the polls, Naidu was under the impression that "he was still the UF convenor. And the UF core committee had to be summoned by him". But to his surprise, the committee met without him and criticised his approach towards the BJP. This was very humiliating for Naidu.

The high-pitch campaign in the north Indian media about his "vacillating stand" and his alleged "double talk" further affected the fragile relationship. "How can they say that? Most of those in the UF are erstwhile Congress leaders. The Janata Dal (JD) has had a catastrophic experience in Karnataka because of Deve Gowda's antics. Whenever Gowda went to Karnataka he abused R.K Hegde in a language which even yellow magazines were ashamed of publishing. Now, Gowda talks of political morality," Naidu said in an interview.

Meanwhile, Naidu's relationship with the Left also deteriorated at the national and the state level. Of late, Naidu was unhappy because the Left was using the TDP for its survival in AP. The matters worsened in the last two years, especially after the Left started making greater demands for the support they extended to Naidu in toppling NTR in August 1995.

Naidu offered them many lucrative contracts and prize posts in the government. Yet, they were not satisfied. Naidu now wanted to throw them off his back. And this mood became apparent from the manner in which the party leaders celebrated the CPI(M)'s defeat in all the three Lok Sabha seats it contested in the state. Even the CPI candidates managed to win only by slender margins.

More recently, Naidu had also become apprehensive about the extent of support he would get from the Left parties.

Under the circumstances, the TDP's decision to support the BJP at the Centre is not surprising. Naidu realises that the BJP is emerging as an alternative to the Congress in AP. This is amply proved by data: the percentage of votes polled by the BJP in AP has gone up from 5 in 1996 to 20 in 1998. In fact, in the last two years, the BJP has emerged as the most important anti-Congress force in the south.

Naidu doesn't want to antagonise the BJP before the Assembly polls due within a year, because he needs financial assistance from the Centre to complete such pet projects like the Janmabhoomi. And Naidu realises that his obsession with the World Bank-aided restructuring of the economy, his dream of making Hyderabad the gateway of the south and his programmes like Vision-2020 will all get derailed if there is an enemy at the top.

Politically, too, Naidu finds the BJP to be an useful partner: after all, the Congress is the common enemy of both the BJP and the TDP. Moreover, Naidu knows that if a Congress-led government comes to the Centre, it will use any pretext to overthrow his regime in Andhra Pradesh. And with the polarisation of the *mala* and *madiga* votes, Naidu would like to have the support of a cadre-based organisation like the BJP to win them over and to get the maximum mileage at the hustings. So as of now, Naidu is in total command over the situation. And only months ahead will prove whether the master manipulator has played his cards right, yet again. •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

POINTS TO PONDER

Beware, Mr Naidu

■ **One:** The [illegible] moved away from the TDP [illegible] the days of NTR [illegible] and religious stances, [illegible] Rajayogi in saffron, [illegible] earrings, etc. Also, NTR's mythological films shown during the poll campaigns didn't go down well with the minorities. And now, with the TDP giving support to the BJP, the Muslims would [illegible] move away from Naidu.

■ **Two:** The support accorded by the TDP to the BJP government at the Centre will affect the 14-year-old relationship with the Left parties in Andhra Pradesh. The Left parties will not help Naidu any more in his political battles.

■ **Three:** The TDP [illegible] already known as a Kamma party, will also now be labelled as a communal party in the state by a section of the voters. A factor that could affect its fortunes in the forthcoming Assembly polls.

Speaking terms

G.M.C. Balayogi has to manage a House almost evenly divided in its opinion about him

Poor Ganti Mohana Chandra Balayogi! In his curriculum vitae, he lists service of the poor and the downtrodder among his special interests. He is also fond of sports, especially cricket.

Not much time for old pastimes in his present job as Speaker of the 12th Lok Sabha. But what might help is the fact that he has spent some time organising song and drama competitions among schoolchildren. And there is enough of *that* in the present Lok Sabha.

Enough jokes have been cracked about the Indian Airlines' sense of timing and the fact that if Balayogi's plane from Hyderabad had not landed on time, his party colleague K. Yerran Naidu would have been sitting in the Speaker's chair.

In fact, a second-term MP, Balayogi had absolutely no idea of what fate and Chandrababu Naidu had in store for him when he landed at Delhi Airport. "I had planned on taking my oath as a member of Parliament and going off to Tirupati the next day," he told his friends.

That was before his world turned topsy-turvy. Since then, Balayogi has had to endure a lot more than just unruly schoolboy tantrums. He has had to put up with digs such as P.A. Sangma's barbed translation of his name 'Young Saint' with a smile. He has since then been accused of cowing down to the Bharatiya Janata Party, has had to hear the Haryana Vikas Party's Surinder Singh comparing him unfavourably with his predecessor and has also had the leader of the Opposition, the placid Sharad Pawar, losing his temper at him.

He would have been better off at Tirupati.

It doesn't help that his predecessor was someone as strong as Sangma. In their speeches on the first day of Parliament, rather than congratulating Balayogi, most MPs sang paeans in praise of Sangma, recalling how he had kept the House in order, even if sometimes they had been hard put to figure out whether he was standing or sitting on the chair.

Balayogi sat through it all, smiled and said nothing. Later in the midst of all the commotion, it was Laloo Yadav who advised him to sit back, take off the headphones and just relax. A worried Balayogi did not take his advice but kept admonishing the member with 'please'.

On the second day, he progressed beyond the 'please'. He showed off with the two new things he had learnt: the use of the bell and a warning to extra-garrulous speakers that if they did not shut up, their remarks would be expunged from the record. The second, he found, worked better.

When he heard that his party chief Chandrababu Naidu was in town, Balayogi's first instinct was to rush to greet him. It was then pointed out that since he's the Speaker, Naidu should pay him a visit

He will take time to learn the ropes and Sangma's infamous rule book. Though he has the right credentials — he is the first Dalit Speaker of the Lok Sabha — he has to bring order to a Lok Sabha that is almost evenly divided in its opinion about him. Not only is Balayogi not a consensus candidate, he had, more or less, half the House against his candidature.

Never has the Opposition been so belligerent. But then, never has the mandate been so fractured. As the former finance minister, P. Chidambaram, pointed out in his speech, "Never before has the Parliament been split right down the middle." And it is the 47-year-old MP from Andhra Pradesh who has to preside over this mess.

After a point, even his *allies* lost patience with him. At the time of the vote of confidence, Balayogi immediately launched into the procedures of a division vote, without first going through a voice vote. A panicky Sushma Swaraj was on her feet screaming that since no one had asked for a division, the Speaker should first go through the voice vote. To his credit, Balayogi went on with his explanations and only after he had finished he let the House scream out their ayes and nos.

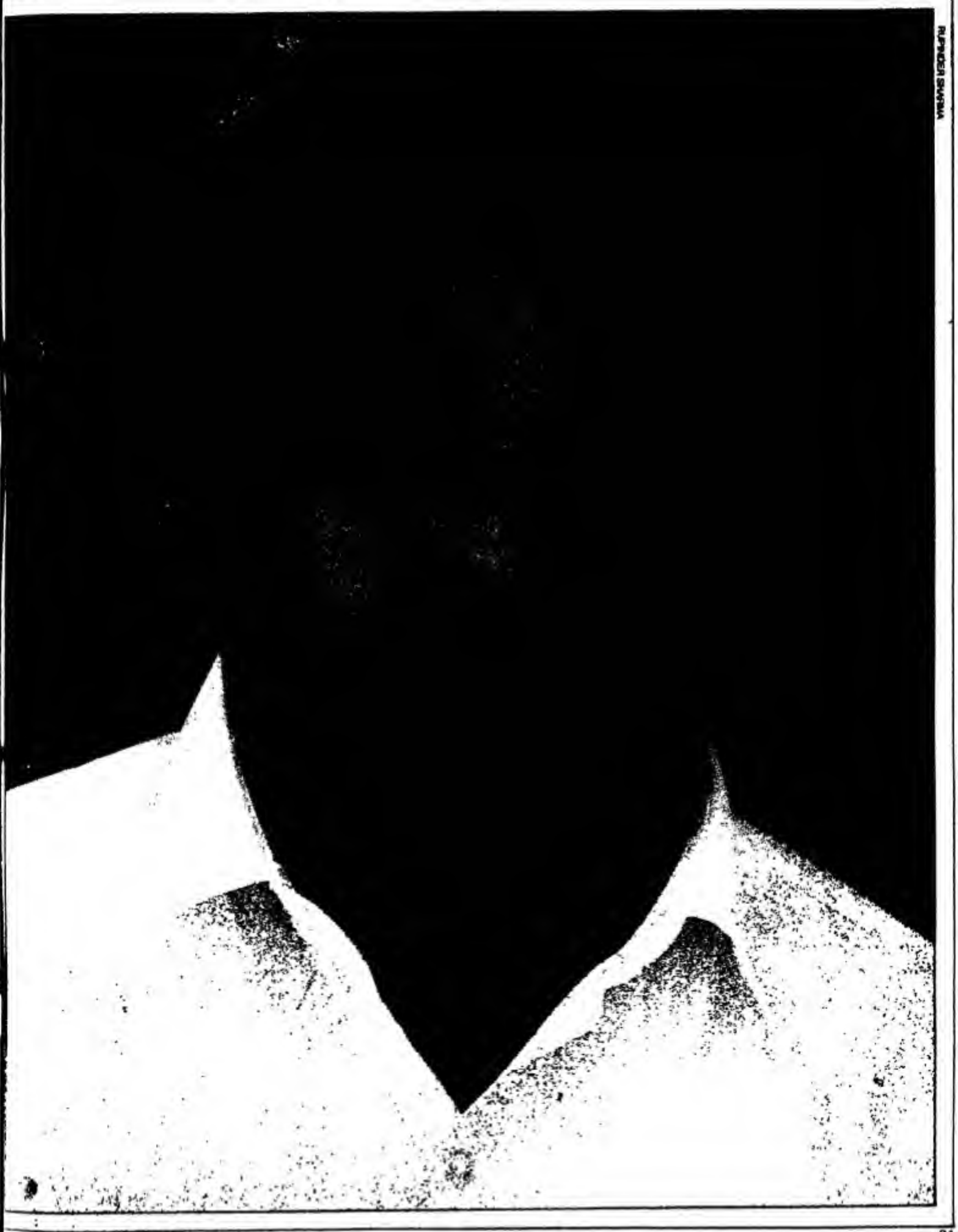
The moral of the story: he will go by the rule book, but he will also do it his own way, and so what if the BJP has to face a few anxious moments in the bargain.

What will also help is his sense of humility. After he was made Speaker and he heard that his party supremo Chandrababu Naidu was in town, his first instinct was to rush over and greet him. It was then pointed out that since he's the Speaker, it is Naidu who should pay him a visit.

Even when Mayawati shouted on the floor of the House that installing a BJP nominee as Speaker would amount to repeating Uttar Pradesh in Delhi, Balayogi said nothing. Later he told his friends that he had stopped taking these things personally.

He is astute enough to realise that there are more political games at stake, other than just ragging a second-time Dalit MP.

And therein lies his salvation. •



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JUST A SONG, MAN

[redacted] Rap singers are known to be swanky, cranky types, but making a song out of a pair of dungarees! Borders on madness, right?

The details:

Baba Sehgal — that's the '*thanda, thanda pani*' guy — went to Australia and bought a pair. It worked like magic because, hey presto, the next moment he had made a song out of them — '*Dangri, Dangri, Dangre Do*'. Defies logic, yes, but you can have sudden fantasies. He didn't stop there, he brought out an album, *Jugni Mast Kalandar*.

ALOKE MITRA

A Sehgal performance: so what if it's dungarees?

'*Dangre do*' has a foreign setting and Archies, the music company which released the album, thinks it's going to beat '*thanda, thanda pani*' in popularity. But ask Baba what the song means, his guess is as good as yours.

Maybe, true genius is about how much surprise you pack in, even if it means zapping yourself.

BEING TACTFUL

[redacted] For businessmen, it's important to be politically correct. So Swraj Paul, who's always been pro Labour, surprised quite a few when he said it was okay having the BJP in power. The BJP, he said, was like New Labour which had done away with its previous images of control by trade unions and hard-Left militants. The BJP too had toned down its extreme Hindutva agenda and was no longer communal.

Of course, that isn't the entire picture. Because,

Lord Paul: on the right side of the Right

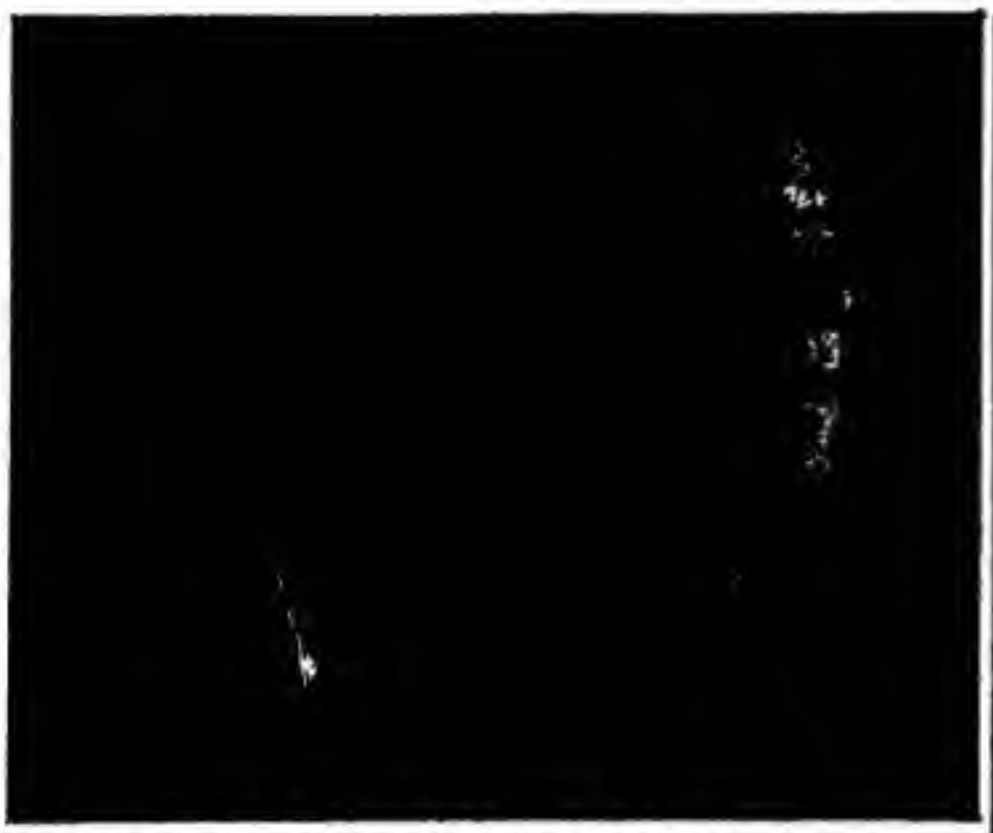
while Labour leaders Neil Kinnock, John Smith and eventually Prime Minister Tony Blair had expelled the militants and actually changed the Labour Party constitution cutting off trade union domination, Vajpayee hasn't made any fundamental changes in the party. He has only softened its agenda.

So is Lord Paul playing safe? Maybe yes. Why antagonise people when all it takes is a little bit of tact?

INDECENT PROPOSAL

[redacted] Leching is dirty enough, but fingering women in the dark is depravity. Aussie batsman Ricky Ponting must have figured that out by now.

At the Equinox, a discotheque in Calcutta, Ponting tried acting fresh with a woman journalist after being told that the floor wasn't open to stag dancing. Then, sozzled already, he got close and physical with a female bartender when he was collared by the security guards, got into a scuffle, and was thrown out of the



Kochar: once a designer, always a designer

PAINTER-DESIGNER

[redacted] Can hangers inspire paintings? They can, apparently. Jattin Kochar, who recently opened a multiplex boutique with a sports cafe and a flower shop, decorated its stark white walls with his own paintings where the theme is hangers. "They are so important for us designers," he said. "I was inspired."

So are we.

Gere: comforting a Tibetan hunger-striker in Delhi

D P SINHA

Ponting: no smut, please

hotel.

Probably it was bruised ego — Australia were swamped in four days in their worst-ever defeat in India — but that's no excuse for excessive libido.

NOBLE CAUSE

[redacted] Sounds kinky, but AIDS does have a kind of pull. Else, you wouldn't have an international celebrity like Richard Gere attending two fashion shows in India. Or people like Kapil Dev and Sharmila Tagore agreeing to socialite Bina Ramani's request to volunteer as models and walk down the ramp. "I guess AIDS is the sort of cause that appeals to modern people," said Ramani, whose charity outfit Art of Giving is the organiser of the shows (one comes on today in Bombay).

About Gere's participation, Ramani was candid. "Richard's interest in India is growing. His involvement with Buddhism and the Tibetan cause have made his association with India even more meaningful."

But it was her quip about the name Art of Giving that was interesting: "It's meant to be an inspiration," she said. "Hope it'll prompt people to think that giving is a form of art."

Ramani: thinking about AIDS

The Young and

Children learning the Koran by rote

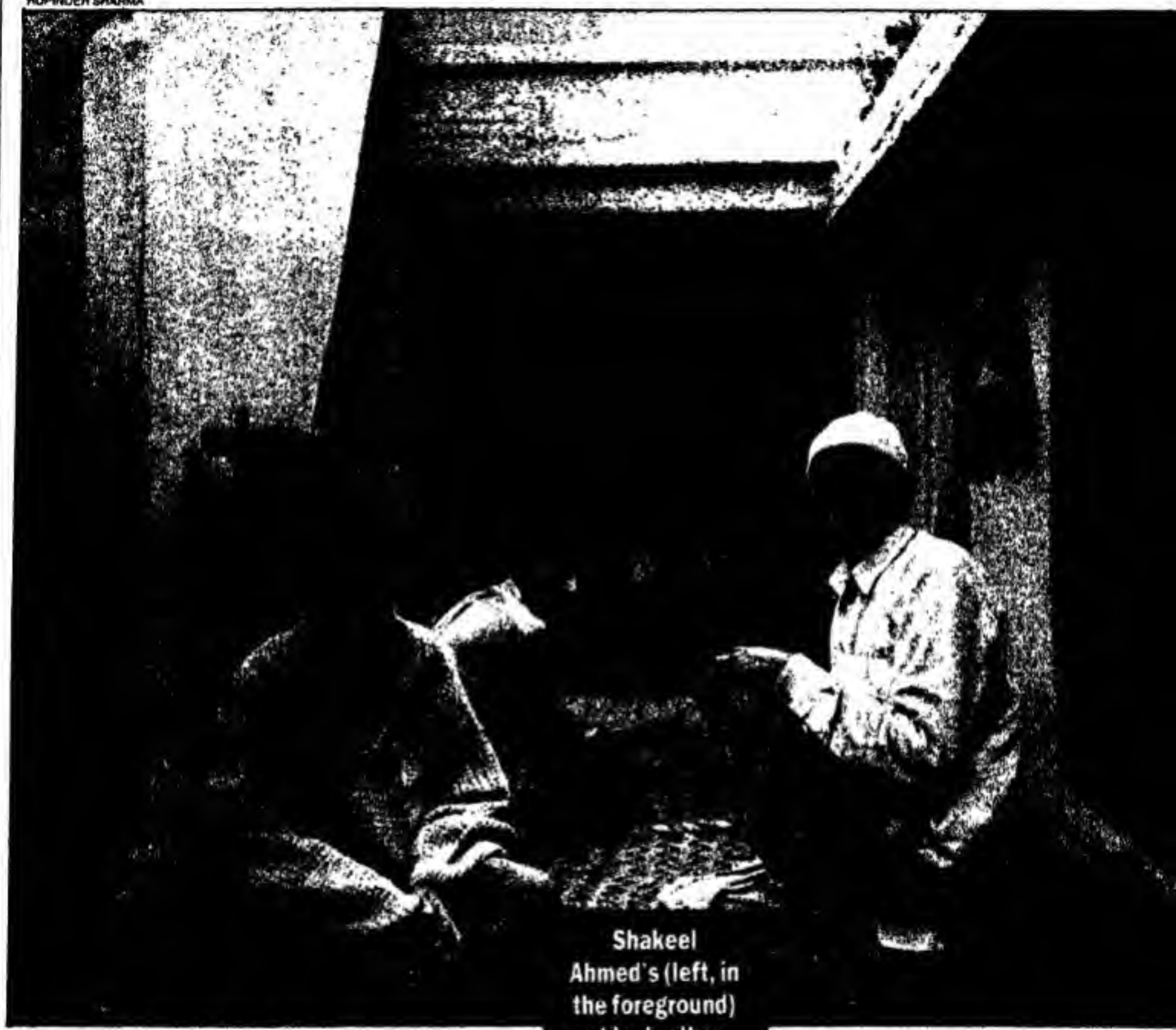
the Restless

Zulfikar Nasir walks like well over a decade in the dim-lit one-room workshop in Hashimpura he shares. When he was 15, 11 years ago, he came back from the dead and you know seeing him he will never be young again. He has thinning hair and he has that special stillness of sitting and gentleness of speech that those that have had much done to them too soon have.

On 22 May, 1987, during a break in riots in Meerut, Nasir was picked from among hundreds of Hashimpura's Muslims pulled out of homes and lined on the main street for identification of rioters and butted up, and packed in with 55 other Muslims, aged 12 to 60, into an open-backed truck of the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) and driven, heads down, .303s pointed at them, out of Meerut. "I saw Bansal cinema and I knew we were on Delhi Road," he says.

At 9.30, they stopped at a secluded wooded spot by Ganga Canal near Muradnagar and taking positions the PAC *jawans* brought them down one by one. "Yasin sahib, who was 60, was first and he was shot and thrown into the canal and then it was Ashraf who was newly-married and I was

RUPINDEH SHARMA



Shakeel Ahmed's (left, in the foreground) elder brother (then 18) was killed by the PAC in 1987 near Muradnagar in UP. To the right is Shakeel's uncle, Abdul Majid

third and the bullet grazed my side and I fell bleeding and did not rise and they thought I was dead too and dropped me into the water. I didn't know how to swim and clutched at nearby reeds and another boy Asif who had also escaped joined me. For one hour, there were sounds of shooting and crying."

Later, on the bank, he came upon Kamruddin, a neighbour, shot in the stomach, who had to be left to die in a highway tea-shop because someone there slipped away in Nasir's knowing to intimate the police. Then he somehow reached Muradnagar's octroi check-post and hid himself in the lavatory for 15 hours until he could reach his relatives.

Mohsina Kidwai, who was MP from Meerut, refused to help. Nasir's story reached the newspapers 15 days later after Chandra Shekhar and Shahabuddin called a press conference.

He is calm so far. From having repeated the story so often, he remembers accurately who died but not who survived. "Many left Hashimpura and did not return," he explains.

Does he hate Hindus?

"No. It was not a Hindu-Muslim riot. The PAC killed us. The government punished home guards. Officers went free."

Did he ever think of going after them with a gun?

"What can I do with a gun? More bloodshed? What is the use?"

Ever thought of leaving the country?

"We were born here. *Zor hai*. We will be Mohajirs in Pakistan. We want justice here. We want Hindustan to do well. But we are being pressurised. What can they get out of that?"

What of the Coimbatore bombings?

"Those are political bomb blasts."

Has he friends or acquaintances making bombs?

(Silence)

What makes him angry?

"Seeing the PAC. My blood boils." His rising voice

PRAKASH HATVALNE

"Pakistan is comparatively peaceful. Muslims are freer there," says Raja, seen here with his father, Kaloo Sheikh

wastes away.

Then he murmurs, "What can we do? We don't have a leader to guide us. *Akela aadmi kya kar lega* (What can one man do)?"

Simulating life, now?

'Finish everyone'

Raja, 15, was early damaged, too. His brother Anwar, standing at their window, was shot dead in police firing from the street two days after riots in Bhopal, after the Babri Masjid was demolished on 6 December, 1992. There was curfew and Raja's father, Kaloo Sheikh, couldn't buy ice and Anwar rotted and smelled for three days until Hamida Bi, who works with Bhopal gas victims, contacted the police.

"They came with heavy boots and we fled fearing they would kill us and only women and small children were there and the body was removed for post-mortem," says Kaloo Sheikh, who did not file a complaint against the police.

"*Dimag sannata hain kisi din sabko nipta doon, par main us policewalah ko janta nahin hoon* (Sometimes my head swirls to finish everyone, but I don't know the policeman)," says Raja. "Pakistan is comparatively peaceful. Muslims are freer there. Only Saddam Hussein is creating trouble!"

Kaloo Sheikh is unread and knows no better to tell. With the Rs 2 lakh-compensation for Anwar, he started a dairy farm outside Bhopal. He returns late, has six more children, and his wife knows little of the outside world to advise Raja. "What am I to do if one day my son gets out of hand?" he says. "I try to pacify him but how can I stop him from doing what he wants to do?"

That is at the back of Abdul Majid's mind as he restrains his nephew, Shakeel Ahmed, 22, a Hashimpura embroiderer. His brother, Ayub, was 18 and his cousins Gayoom, 15, and Mohammad Yunus, 12, when the PAC murdered them in 1987 by the Ganga Canal. "Ayub loved me and Yunus and I played together," says Shakeel, bones emerging in his tightening face. "*Dil mein gussa...*," Abdul Majid, tall and gangly, with great white handlebars, and head of the clan, cuts him short.

In Patna, Mohammad Sajjad Anwar, who has studied in a *madrasa* in Madhubani district, says unstoppably: "*Woh din gaye jab Khalid Khan fakhta udaya karte the*. This is the age of counter-security. Do you think only Muslims are hit in riots? Because Laloo Yadav controlled the riots in Bihar, many Hindus were saved. *Sona chhodo, loha kharido*. This is what I say. *Maare to do taraf hi jayenge*."

Northward bound

Brave words? Or do Zulfikar Nasir's internal wounds, Raja's vengefulness and Shakeel Ahmed's repressed anger,

COLOUR OF MONEY

The ISI is pumping fake currency notes into India

Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) activities in India have so far remained confined to espionage, dumping of arms, ammunition and explosives, etc, etc. But recent findings of the UP police indicate that the ISI is now attacking the very foundations of the Indian economy. Brand-new counterfeit currency notes are being pumped in and at least in UP, they are already in wide circulation.

A top official of the UP police, acting on a tip-off, used a decoy to purchase notes worth Rs 10,000 for just Rs 4,500 in Kanpur.

"We have reason to believe that these notes are being printed across the border with highly sophisticated machines," said the cop. "Nepal is

DHEERAJ DHAWAN

The fake currency notes in circulation in UP

being used as the conduit to pump these notes into India. And these notes are probably in widespread circulation here."

A top UP official stated that this was part of Pakistan's obvious gameplan "to destabilise the Indian economy" "Once you have abundance of fake currency notes, systematically spread all over the country, you can well imagine the damage it is going to cause to our whole economy," he warned.

Realising the need for urgent damage-control, the UP police have urged the CBI to probe the affair "so that this menace could be nipped in the bud and the nation saved from this cunningly-designed economic onslaught by the ISI". •

Sharat Pradhan/Lucknow

multiplied by all fatherless/motherless/sisterless/brotherless/orphaned victims of riots, who may thus feel, tot up to a threat? Might some of them — for money's sake, revenge, or as abused Muslims — have abetted in year-long explosions rocking Delhi and north India in the past one year?

And why Coimbatore or Madras? What explains the chain explosions and recoveries of huge caches of bombs and firearms from a state known for sectarian stability and ruled by one of two anti-Brahmin, idol-breaking political parties, the DMK or the AIADMK, for decades? And what accounts for such violence in the south exceeding that in the north?

Is it that decades of riots and police violence in the north, neglect and poverty, have destroyed the spirit of youth here, while near absence of these in the south, sectarian peace, enrichment through trade, and literacy, emboldened them there?

Are those then there more sensitive, for example, to the rise of the Hindu Munnani, a RSS front organisation, and more ready to take them on than those

RUPINDER SHARMA

Meerut's Abdul Jabbar: "We were born here and we will be buried here"

SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT *Some Islamic seats of learning*

Darul-Uloom

• A seminary in Deoband (Saharanpur district), it was established in 1866. It is the seat of the Deoband doctrine that lays down ground-rules for the practice of the Islamic way of life, and unlike Sir Saiyyad Ahmed Khan's Aligarh school, remained opposed to British rule. Deobandis supported the Khilafat movement for restoration of the Ottoman Caliphate, dismantled by the British, and fully backed the Indian National Congress and the Freedom Movement.

However, after Independence, there have been problems with the Deoband doctrine. Most Indian Muslims follow the Barelvi tradition that allows such practices as anniversary celebrations of Muslim saints, tomb-worship, and belief in "salvation through the mediation of saints". Some of these are almost Hindu in tradition, and so the Deobandis reject them. They insist that true Islam flows only from the Koran and the Hadith, and believe in the centrality of the Shariah.

The rector of Darul-Uloom is scarcely interested in entering into a debate on problems between these two schools of thought. "Earlier, we used to send people from here, who could argue with the Barelvis on stages, so that our point of view came across. But it often led to violence, and we have stopped it now."

Darul-Uloom has a Byzantine

> There is an openness in the atmosphere of Darul-Uloom that belies allegations of intelligence agencies of conspiracies being made against the Indian state

architecture and its old mosque is grand and beautiful. There is an openness in the atmosphere that belies allegations of intelligence agencies of conspiracies being made against the Indian state. They also claim that the seminary receives funds from abroad, especially Saudi Arabia, but the rector rebuts it. "We run this university only on voluntary donations and have rejected all aid of government. Even Dr Rajendra Prasad offered funds, but we declined."

What remains, though, and what worries government agencies is that more radical than ever before, the Deobandis. "Once you become a Deobandi, it makes sense to become a Deobandi, because you lead a respectable life. ... [illegible] ... 10 per cent of Indian Muslims [illegible] Deobandis, the number [illegible]

that have lived cheek by jowl with really rabid Hindus in such places as, say, Sambhal, in western UP, and with the RSS for all their lives?

And, have prosperity and education made young Muslims from lands of the Cauvery, the Krishna, the Godavari, prouder, less forgiving, less forgetful? Would the December '92-January '93 riots in Bhopal and Bombay and other places, and the Bombay blasts later, have expunged the shame of Babri Masjid's demolition, and the hurt of deaths from riots, less in the south than in the north?

Mayn't that be why S.A. Basha, the alleged mastermind of this February's Coimbatore explosions, established the Al Umma, whose boys placed the devices in as many as 200 places, after the Babri Masjid was demolished, and set on to have the RSS office in Madras bombed in 1993? And the explosion on a southern train occurred on the seventh anniversary of the demolition of the Masjid. And Rahim, general-secretary of the All-India Jehad Committee, another terrorist organisation, was arrested. What would all that show?

Politicians have let down the Muslims. No government cares. There is little that the community can do. So they are pretty much on their own and anyone that comes along can exploit them. It is happening

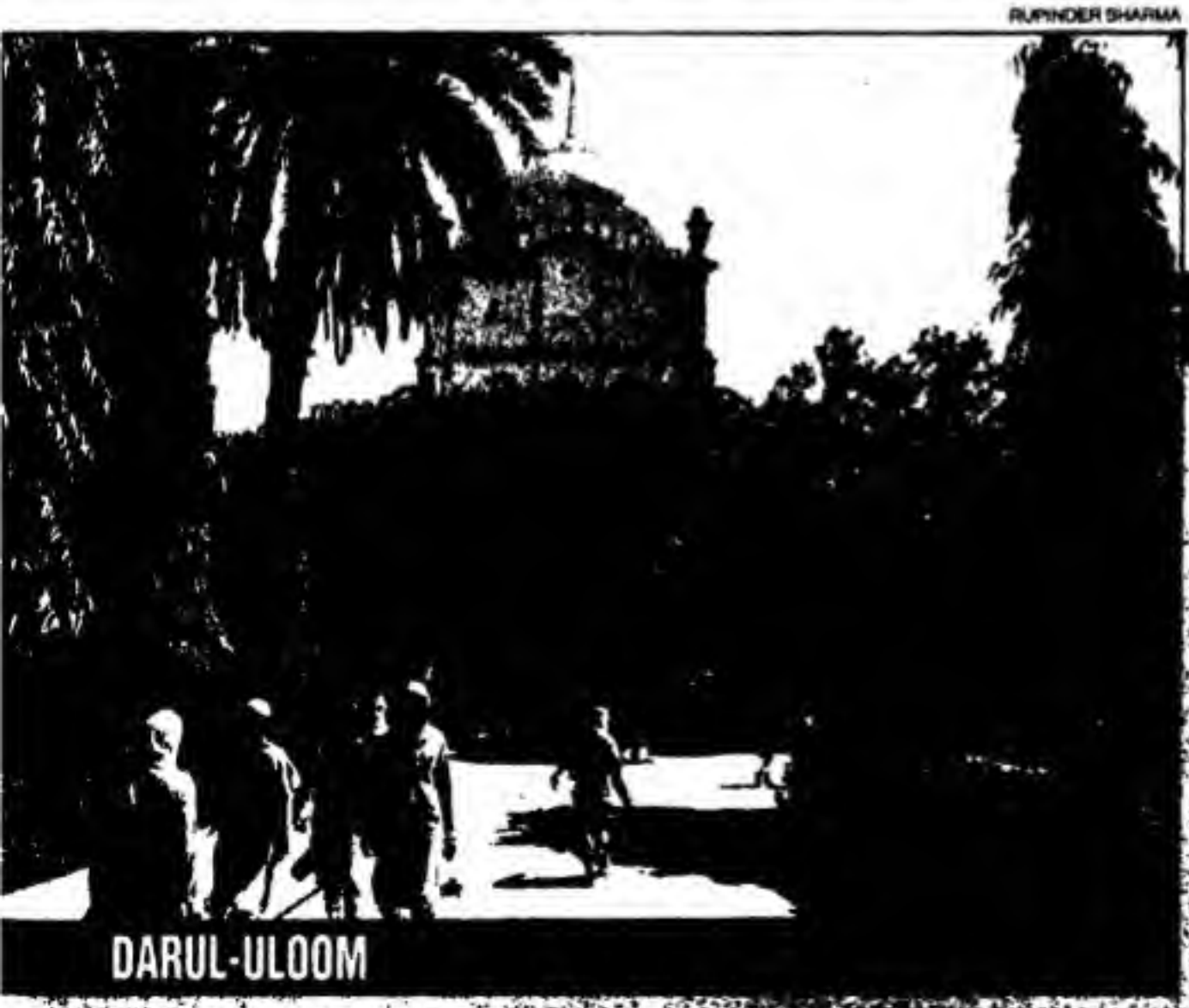
Hurt Muslim pride? Or... well... hurt Muslim Tamil pride? Sinhalese repression produced Tamil Tigers, the most dreaded guerrilla force in the world. Are Al Umma or Jehad Committee forerunners of a kind of Islamic LTTE?

Can Muslim extremism in the south, particularly Tamil Nadu, be wiped out, ever, therefore? Why on earth would M. Karunanidhi, a LTTE sympathiser, call the Al Umma boys, before the Coimbatore explosion, 'Savalai Pillaigal', or uncared-for children?

On 29 March, 77 kg of explosives in four suitcases and two bags were recovered from a house outside Madras. Three absconding Al Umma activists Ayesha, alias Sangeetha, her husband Mohammed Ibrahim, and Zakir Hussain, alias Usman, had left it behind. Police say with this all explosives brought into Madras have been accounted for.

Have they? Is this the end? Or will in time southern militants lead the way northwards? Make do with gelatine and ammonium chlorate and 80-rupee bombs? Or will they ride hard for RDX?

RUPINDER SHARMA



DARUL-ULOOM

coalesce, in the words of M.S. Agwani, a renowned Islamic scholar, "a strictly fundamentalist stance in religious matters with a flexible and innovative approach to political affairs". Thus, a call for return to true Islam and Hadith somehow settles uncomfortably with the concept of nationalism. And this had never been resolved at Deoband so far. But small changes are evident. The [illegible] for instance, are now being

foundations for the Indian state, challenged for years with the codoept of pan-Islamism, Husain Ahmed Madani, the best-known of all Jamiatis, opposed the two-nation theory that established Pakistan saying, "We, the inhabitants of India, in so far as we are Indians, have one thing in common and that is our Indianness that remains unchanged in spite of our religious and cultural differences." He called this concept "Muttahidah Qawmiyat" or Composite Nationalism.

Nadwat-ul-Ulama (Nadwah)

• Set up in 1893 as an institution that was neither anti-British like Darul-Uloom nor supportive of the English like the Aligarh movement. It was meant to evolve a system drawing the best from Islamic and Western

SCOOP NEWS

Sinhalese repression produced Tamil Tigers, the most dreaded guerrilla force in the world. Is the Al Umma, said to be responsible for the Coimbatore blasts, the forerunner of a kind of Islamic LTTE?

The network

Government agencies, at least until the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power, were scarcely interested in putting a big picture together of Muslim youth and extremism in the light of these explosions. Only certain intelligence officers seem to have applied themselves.

They say a 'moderate' arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) controls 5,000 Muslim militants. They are in, among other places, West Bengal (1,000 persons; largest module; having strike capability), Bihar (500, concentrated in Kishenganj, includes some of the MP Taslimuddin's men), UP (Gorakhpur/Ghazipur, with links to Nepal MP Mirza Dilshad Beg's network; Allahabad/Kanpur, includes kidnappers allegedly close to former MP D.P. Yadav; Meerut, a large concentration, along the route of the Samjhauta Express; and Aligarh), Ahmedabad, Bombay, Cochin, Hyderabad, and Tamil Nadu (Coimbatore, Tirunelvelli, Madurai).

"All these are classical intelligence

SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT *Some Islamic seats of learning*

philosophies. And, so that close ties could be forged with Arabia, the heartland of Islam, Nadwah was made into a centre for higher Arabic learning.

The British responded by granting land by the Gonda in Lucknow in 1908 where Nadwah stands today, and, of all seminaries east of Arab lands, Nadwah has perhaps the closest links with Saudi Arabia. But it has been less successful in achieving a synthesis of Islamic and Western thoughts. Today, there is rejection of Western thinking altogether.

Maulana Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi (Ali Mian), the famous rector of Nadwah, visited by Indira Gandhi, V.P. Singh and Atal Behari Vajpayee among others, either in Lucknow or his ancestral home in a remote village in Rae Bareli, personifies all the [illegible] and failures of his [illegible] Muslim [illegible] the world's [illegible] schools and Nadwah was [illegible] the moon. Many

perhaps, is in making more out of Islam.

His quest would seem to be to fashion an Islamic order complete with church and an Islamic ideology built in the manner of communism in the Soviet Union. None of this is easy, nor is Ali Mian easily satisfied.

He abhors growth of nationalism and materialism in Muslim societies and opposes secular ideas. "I am one of those," he wrote in a 1980 book, "who believes that a religious order cannot be established unless religion comes to wield political power and the system of government is based on Islamic foundations."

He found [illegible]

NADWAT-UL-ULAMA

modules," says an officer. "Each module is independent. Within a city, a district, there are two, three totally separated modules. Coimbatore had three of them. So if you bust one, you don't get a domino effect. And, each module has an exclusive, secure line to its ISI-controller either in India, Nepal, Bangladesh or Pakistan."

"This is low-intensity war," he says. "A man using an AK-47 may be caught and AK-47s are expensive. RDX is cheaper and freely available but it requires expert handling and you call attention. Gelatine, bleaching powder, ammonium chlorate and sulphuric acid are all easily available to make a bomb. Put in a timer device and disappear. One 80-rupee bomb keeps 80 per cent of Delhi Police on its toes for 31 days. That is Pakistan's way of waging a war with you."

In this, respected Islamic institutions are also being used. "You have to touch these very, verycarefully," says an agent. "You catch whoever you have to and proclaim they have no connection with the institution in question. The message goes down."

SCOOP NEWS

M. Karunanidhi: why did he refer to the Al Umma boys as the 'uncared-for children' before the Coimbatore blasts?

Some module chiefs have also been caught and played back. There is no pattern to their family backgrounds but they come from disturbed areas. "They are highly motivated and need considerable convincing to work for you," says an interrogator.

Success though has been limited in choking their funds. Some organisations receive charities from such public institutions as the Islamic Development Bank, the World Supreme Council of Mosques, the World Association of Muslim Youth, the Rabit-al-Islami, etc., for social work under the monitored FCRA account. "There are leakages into unsuspected activity," says an official.

More worrisome are Havala monies that are militancy's mainstay. Intelligence guesses upto US$ 15 million is coming in all ways, and that a quarter of it finances terror. "Giving every extremist Rs 50,000 a month from this is not difficult," says an official.

"Part of the incoming money also finances the move towards pure Islam," he says. "This is not *per se* objectionable. But any fundamentalist philosophy produces fundamentalism. We have 150 million Muslims. Even if a small number, say 10-15 lakh, adopt fundamentalism, we have a big problem on our hands."

last line of defence. If the enemy crosses it and we fall back then there will be no hope left for the survival of Islam and the future of Muslims."

Two years later, he was supporting Gen Zia-ul Haq because Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami chief, Abdul Ala Maudidi — who he had assailed for his preoccupation with realising an Islamic state — was backing him. There was an urgency when he wrote, "Maulana (Maudidi) clearly understands that its pro-Islam leaders deserve to be helped and should not be

When Mulayam Singh Yadav was last CM of UP, the IB raided Nadwah to capture some alleged terrorists and that scarred the institution

Any fundamentalist philosophy produces fundamentalism. We have 150 million Muslims. Even if a small number, say 10-15 lakh, adopt fundamentalism, we have a big problem on our hands

Leading 'em

Malik Moatasin Khan, president of the Students Islamic Organisation (SIO) under the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, contends that the blame for that will rest not on Muslims but on communal Hindus. "If the demand for Kashi and Mathura continues," he says, "consider the consequences. We are 12-crore Muslims. This will lead to disintegration. That is for sure."

Syed Salahuddin Ahmed, heading the Students' Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), hardline in its views, agrees. "Every Muslim is hurt. After the demolition, they felt insecure. They had faith in the Indian system. No more. They have gone to other ways that Islam tells them."

And what is it?

"Jehad. Self-defence. The situation is graver than in Palestine. Sacred places are not safe. Israelis use only rubber bullets. Here we face real ones."

This may be taken as ranting except that SIMI is outstripping other Muslim youth organisations in growth. Ahmed is careful to say these are his views. But

SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT *Some Islamic seats of learning*

Supreme Court judgement giving maintenance to Shah Bano and brought pressure on Rajiv Gandhi who made a law excluding Muslim women from operation of maintenance laws. And when Mulayam Singh Yadav was last chief minister of UP, the Intelligence Bureau raided Nadwah to capture some alleged terrorists and that, despite a national uproar, scarred the institution.

What also remains is his view that the Hindu civilisation, like the Greek, Roman and pre-Islamic civilisations, is, now 'no better than ancient monuments'. This is perhaps the way of regular Islamic — and, previously, Marxist — scholars: that any new faith or organising principles may be built only on the ruins of another.

[illegible] Nadwi has always [illegible] he set out to do that [illegible] from his large [illegible] and moderate [illegible]

MAULANA ABUL HASAN ALI NADWI

portions of SIMI's constitution are telling. The oath top members take, reads in one place, "...I promise that I would work for humanity and establishment of (an) Islamic system in my country..."

Ahmed himself is quiet and intense. He is doing a postal concrete engineering course from Annamalai University and speaks Telugu. So does Moatasin Khan. A key man of Tabligh Jamat, whose volunteers teach the rudiments of Islam in mosques, is from Tamil Nadu. So is Ejaz Aslam, a secretary of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind in Delhi, earnest and articulate and eagerly showing you around. Were southerners always preferred?

Khan says, "In south India, they have done things. In the north, the youth are frustrated and completely dispirited. They feel they are not competent to fight." Khan smiles.

Sayeed Hameed, a former vice-chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University, is circumspect. "The demolition of Babri Masjid and its aftermath mauled their self-respect and dignity. But they realise being excited and emotional is producing a short-term reaction." And he gives no chance to Muslim militancy. "It is remote," he says. "We are not like Sikhs. Muslims cannot bear grudges for long."

RUPINDER SHARMA

Syed Asim Ali Sabzwari: the Meerut lawyer who demanded damages for Muslims killed or maimed in the 1987 riots

vision of Islam — is misinterpretation. Future stormtroopers may draw inspiration from his works even though few will appreciate he may never have meant them to.

Jamaat-e-Islami

• Of all Islamic organisations, perhaps the Jamaat-e-Islami is most visible in the subcontinent, and it does not always appeal. In Pakistan, it went on Gen. Zia-ul Haq's side, supported his putsch, and participated in the campaign for Zulfiqar Bhutto's assassination. Jamaat-e-Islami Hind went along with this.

And, in the closing stages of the Liberation War in Bangladesh, in 1971, Jamaat's armed youth wing, Al-Badr, murdered supporters of the nationalist movement. Two days before V-day (16 December, 1971), Sirajuddin Hossain, editor of *Mytheme*, was murdered.

In this country, JEI has been banned usually along with *sangh parivar* organisations, and Ejaz Aslam, its secretary, showing around its spanking new office on large grounds in Abdul Fazl Enclave, tells you again and again there is "nothing to hide".

The problem is with its ideology. It was founded in 1941 by Sayyid A'la Maudidi who "advanced the thesis", according to the Islamicist Agwani "that the supreme purpose of Islam was to establish sovereignty of God on earth or an Islamic state".

It opposed both the Muslim nationalism of the Muslim League and Indian nationalism of the Indian National Congress and especially reserved venom for Maulana Madani's concept of 'composite nationalism'. Latter-day Jamaatis rubbished Hinduism in booklets and advised that "Muslims conversant with the Hindu dharma could very well impress upon their Hindu brethren that the anchor they rely upon is not strong and dependable" and it could be "easier to make them see the merits of Islam".

The Jamaat-e-Islami in J&K has campaigned for separation from India. The Hizbul Mujahideen, militarily the strongest militant group in the Valley, has links with it. •

Latter-day Jamaatis advised that "Muslims conversant with the Hindu dharma could very well impress upon their Hindu brethren that the anchor they rely upon is not strong and dependable"

Babri and after

Still, the demolition, like Operation Bluestar for Sikhs, changed things for Muslims. Sociologist T.N. Madan says it has kept on longer than he thought it would and certainly longer than Operation Bluestar. But it has given goodly fillip to education.

In Muslim Meerut, Sambhal, Deoband, Delhi's Zakir Nagar or Abul Fazl Enclave, there are banners across streets of computer schools and nurseries and coaching classes for medical and engineering colleges. *Madrasas* now teach history and geography and mathematics and computer sciences, and rectors announce that.

But Mohammed Manzoor Alam, chairman of the Institute of Objective Studies in Zakir Nagar, insists Muslims remain excluded from and discriminated against in jobs. He has data of many years of increase of school drop-outs and fall of Muslim post-graduates, doctors and engineers.

"They do not find enough class-IV jobs," he says. A survey last year showed that except the water resources ministry (5 per cent), most others had nil to 2 per cent Muslims. "I know of eminent Muslims in Lucknow who set up professional colleges but were denied recognition."

Sayeed Ahmed is unbelieving. Nor is Professor Afaque Ahmed, secretary of Madhya Pradesh Urdu Academy, con-

EXTREME MEASURES

Profiling S.A. Basha, the man behind Al Umma

[illegible] are Saddam Hussein and LTTE chief V. Prabhakaran. And, like [illegible], he has produced a band of die-hard supporters for whom his word is law. S.A. Basha, who formed the Al Umma in the wake of the Babri Masjid demolition, is now in jail following the chain explosions in Coimbatore in February. But the fire hasn't gone out of him yet.

He began as a firewood salesman from Coimbatore's Muslim ghetto, [illegible], and tried to assassinate such BJP leaders as Jana Krishnamurthy and [illegible] Sundaram, and Hindu Munnani leader Ram Gopalan in 1983. There were continued flare-ups and Basha's career was launched.

Upto the demolition, there was a running battle between the Hindu Munnani and fringe Muslim extremist outfits. In 1994, the RSS office in Madras was blasted but the Tamil Tigers were grabbing the headlines then. When Jayalalitha came to power, she banned Muslims from taking out Milad-Shareef processions in Madras but allowed a Hindu Munnani rally during Vinayaka Chathurti festivities. Vulgar slogans were raised taunting Muslims.

S.A. Basha: made the Al Umma youths highly motivated and totally committed

Thousands of illiterate and poor Muslim youths, between 16 and 26, joined the Al Umma because it gave them tremendous clout within their community. They were well paid and well-looked-after

[illegible] The Hindu Munnani specialised in a smear campaign against Islam, provoking Muslim youths who came under the umbrella of Al Umma. [illegible]

In March 1997, [illegible] was killed by two Hindu Munnani activists [illegible]. And he worked it [illegible]

[illegible]

Says Syed Salahuddin Ahmed of the Students' Islamic Movement of India: "After the Babri Masjid demolition, every Muslim felt insecure. They had faith in the Indian system. No more. They have gone to other ways that Islam tells them"

vinced that Muslims are denied jobs because they are Muslims. But youth in Patna or Bangalore smart hearing this.

"Because I'm a Muslim and have no *pairvi* (pull) I couldn't get a job in a leading tyre company," says Syed Sabah, an electronics businessman in Patna with two brothers in America. "*Bekaar baithne se achha tha ki apna kuch karoon.*"

And Syed Nadeem, 28, trained in computers and managing a family cutlery shop and his antique business, says, "Unemployment is making Muslims insecure. We wish to start more educational institutions but the government refuses permission."

Habib, an activist, remembers boys near his Zakir Nagar home, who could neither pick up an education nor employment and did small crimes. "We pulled them out in time and got them small jobs as mechanics and electrical repairmen and now they are settled. Politicians have let them down. No government cares. There is little that the community can do. So they are pretty much on their own and anyone that comes along can exploit them. It is happening."

Especially vulnerable are victims of communalism. What would Zulfikar Nasir, the survivor of the Ganga Canal massacre, be if he had drifted? What is to become of Raja? Syed Asim Ali Sabzwari, a fiery Meerut lawyer, who demanded damages for Muslims killed or maimed in the 1987 riots, wrote in a 1989 memorandum to the President, "It is... necessary to tell the children... who have seen their parents and others being slaughtered... that the state is capable enough... to penalise the butchers... and that they themselves should not... take revenge..." It is nine years and Sabzwari still awaits acknowledgement from Raisina Hill.

Hate congeals this way. And there is much great and old scholars organising life on religion have left behind that may be consumed lightly and misguidedly. "No one," says SIO president Moatasin Khan, "can stop youth from extremism."

Out of control

Is Pakistan's job in India, if you believe intelligence, readymade, then? Raja speaks of Pakistan adolescently. But Abdul Jabbar, 28, of Meerut, who teaches children, knows better. His father took their family there when he was eight or nine for a good future but they were taunted as Hindus and forced to return. "We were born here and we will be buried here," he says.

Israr Alam, who lives under the Bahadurpur overbridge in Patna, raves about Pakistan. "*Mere chacha shawl ka kaam karte they Kashmiri saheb ke saath. Ab ghar baithe hain. Kehte hain wahan maar-kaat ho rahi hai.*"

And Abdul Waheed of Yakutpura in old Hyderabad, a Muslim township, has remembrance of his nephew, Irfan, killed by Pathans in Karachi. "All Mohajirs from India and abroad are being systematically massacred by local Pathans and Punjabis in Karachi and Lahore," he says. "The Shia-Sunni-Ahmedia divide is very sharp. Here, in the old city, we can live with all sects of Muslims and Hindus. Not there."

How has Pakistan then an underground army of 5,000 extremists? What went so horribly wrong in Coimbatore that S.A. Basha's men packed in enough explosives to bomb it out of maps? Why indeed are terrorists mushrooming in gentle south?

"It is tricky on the part of the minority community to roll up its sleeves and adopt a belligerent attitude," says Sayeed Hamid. But this is no match in the ring. Life is being dictated, God knows why, by a man-made timer device. •

Naved Zahir/Patna, Deshdeep Saxena/Bhopal, Sreedhar Pillai/Madras, G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad, Gauri Lankesh/Bangalore, Sharat Pradhan/Lucknow, Surendra Patra/Bhubaneswar, N.V. Subramanian/Delhi, Meerut, Deoband and Lucknow

THE MONEY-P

A room which would put a hut to shame. Two computer terminals and half-a-dozen telephone lines. One of the phones rings: 'Hello Seth.' says a husky voice. 'Kitna hai?' '65-155', pat comes the reply

The above exchange which makes little sense to the uninitiated, means money for those in the know. It is the *satta* (gambling) rate which is being discussed. The occasion is the post-lunch session of the second Test match between Australia and India in Calcutta. '65-155' decoded means 65 paise for one rupee on the drawn Test.

The *satta* or gambling industry is a study in contradiction. The stakes are high but the investments frugal.

It is a low-cost industry. All you need is a dingy room — the smaller the better — a couple of boys, telephone lines (mobiles are handier) and willing patrons. And the last are available by the dozen.

In Delhi alone, the daily stakes are to the tune of Rs 50,000-60,000 which gives an indication of the large number of people who make a beeline for the *satta* market.

The counters at Jharpada, the special jail area, CRP square, bus stand and other sleazy places in Bhubaneswar are a scene of flurried activity as early as 6 am every day. Within an hour, buyers who arrive in a mob buy tickets which are sold out within an hour of opening shop. It is never too early to earn a couple of bucks. Gambling comes in various forms and shapes — each more innovative than the other.

The crudest and oldest is the *matka* or *teen patti*. The names vary from region to region but the modus operandi is the same. The essence of this form of gambling is laying stakes on a single digit. Cards are drawn and divided into three decks and bets are laid on numbers which range from one to ten. Gambling is done on one rupee and if the number

PRADIP SANYAL

SCENT OF MONEY: a bookie tells the results of a *satta* draw

LAYERS

They are everywhere — from AC rooms to sleazy joints. How gamblers operate

of the bettor tallies with the chosen number, the one who has the stakes gets ten rupees. The others who lose the money, lose it to the *satta baaz*. At the end of the day, while the losers earn nothing — squandering possibly whatever they had — it's the agent who counts his riches. Often money to the tune of five to six lakhs is involved.

Matka takes another form which demands considerable concentration.

There are ten digits — one to nine — the last being *mindi* that is, zero. Every digit has a table of 22 more numbers. They are three-digit numbers and the total of each of these digits is a two-digit number. The second digit of the total of a particular table matches the parent

The *satta* or gambling industry is a study in contradiction. The stakes are high but the investments frugal. The entire process is carried out with almost clock-work precision

digit — one to zero. For instance, take digit number 1 and the table goes like 128, 137, 146...and so on. The total of 128 is 11. Similarly, 137 would also total 11. The results are announced at least four times a day. In Delhi for instance, results are announced at 5.20 am (in the Dishawar Ghadiya area), 7 pm (Motia Mahal), and 9 pm (Fatehpuri).

The 'industry' works through minimum frills. In a pint-sized room, which is the head office, sit three *munims* (accountants) who are in constant touch with the agents of branch offices. The actual deal is carried out by the bookies, who take bets from customers and make the payment. Cash is exchanged through what is called a 'courier' system. Except the final payment, there is no other transaction and all calculations are done telephonically.

GAMBLERS' CHOICE

Chakri: It comprises a plate, the size of a bicycle wheel with nails all round the border. A tongue-cleaner acts as a marker. The wheel is spun and the marker stops after it is placed between the nails on any number. Bidding is on any number and for every ten rupees betted, Rs 50 is earned if the marker stops at the winning number. Occasionally, the game is played with pictures of animals on the roulette.

Matka: A game of numbers. Bet is laid on any number, digits are totalled and the one who has laid a stake on the winning number gets money. The name is so derived as the number is chosen by digging into a pitcher (*matka*).

Lotteries: The all-time favourite but now the going is tough as all lotteries, barring that of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, have been banned. Payment is made on the last number. Its popularity has also meant that bogus tickets are printed in abundance.

Traditional bets: From the city of *nawabs* comes bets on games like kite-flying (patangbazi), cock-fighting (murgabazi), patridge-fighting (baterbazi), tonga race and wrestling.

Issue-based betting: It can be anything, ranging from placing stakes on sports (horse racing, cricket, tennis, football, etc.) to which party will come to power at the Centre, to how long a government will last, to the budget, even to whether there will be food-shedding. Money involved is high. So are the stakes.

The entire process is carried out smoothly and with almost clock-work precision. Stakes are placed, money betted, numbers drawn and money exchanged — but all this is not possible without the connivance of the authorities. Admits an ex-*satta* operator in Delhi: "We pay the local police about a third of our daily income — which amounts to about Rs 20,000-25,000 per month." In Patna, police stations are aware of the gambling centres operating in their jurisdiction. But no action is ever taken. A cut to the police has been fixed as 'protection money'. If a senior police officer of the Bihar cadre is to be believed, then south Bihar's coal belt, along with Patna, are the coveted zones to which police officers vie to be posted. All for the lure of that extra buck.

Speaking to SUNDAY, a guessing-centre shareholder said that officers-in-charge of major police stations in Patna earn Rs 50,000 per month as their share of the booty. So is the case in Bhopal where a senior police officer posted in police headquarters admits that "a percentage of the money earned reaches higher level officers. This ensures no interruption in the dealings of the gamblers".

Given the nature of the trade, it has to be operated clandestinely. A fact which suits the cops fine as it is the need to work under wraps which is what enables them to make quick money.

Not that being nabbed by the police poses any great danger for *satta* operators. The conviction rate is low, amounting to about 30 to 40 percent, and is a bailable offence. In 1997 alone, in the Connaught Place Police Station, only three cases came up for hearing under the Gambling Act.

The punishment is 15 days imprisonment and a fine of Rs 500 for a first-time offence. For every subsequent offence, the amount is raised but not more than Rs 1,000.

Though the police are aware of the *satta* centres, they plead helplessness when it comes to taking action. Though the chief reason is police compliance, the reality remains that even in cases where the police are willing, there is little they can do. "The laws pertaining to gambling are age-old and imagine the punishment meted out — it is mere pittance. No *satta* operator quits because he has been arrested. The punishment is a laugh — so there is no stopping him from striking back," says an assistant commissioner of Police of an Old Delhi area.

The losses are so few that winding up an operation and shifting it to another area is no big deal. What really keeps the *satta* dons going is the lack of competition among them and mutual understanding as to the areas of operation.

For instance, the Trans-Yamuna area where the bulk of Delhi's gambling takes place has fixed hours allotted to the gamblers. Shyam and Ram open shop around 5.20 am and work in the zone within 500 kms of Karol Bagh. 7 pm is the time given to Hazi Inayat and his son Haji. And 9 pm belongs to Lala Nandan. No one normally encroaches on the other's area though there are occasional cases of gang wars. Nothing to be taken seriously.

Considering the high stakes involved, isn't duping impossible? No. As a cop in Delhi, and one who has observed them closely, says, *"Yeh to faith ka crime hai* (It is a crime based on faith)."

Daily, millions of rupees exchange hands, deals are struck, cash negotiated — and the work carries on. This is so, because the *satta baaz* knows that if one of them spills the beans, it may be his turn to face the axe next time.

The confidence also stems from the fact that there is political patronage.

Manoranjan Mohanty, a police offi-

PRADIP SANYAL

SHADY ACCOUNTS: a *satta* operator keeps track of deals

STUD SENSE: it's big-time gamb

SATTA LINGO

Ek ka Dus: for every number, the stake is Rs 10.

Kholdha: one crore

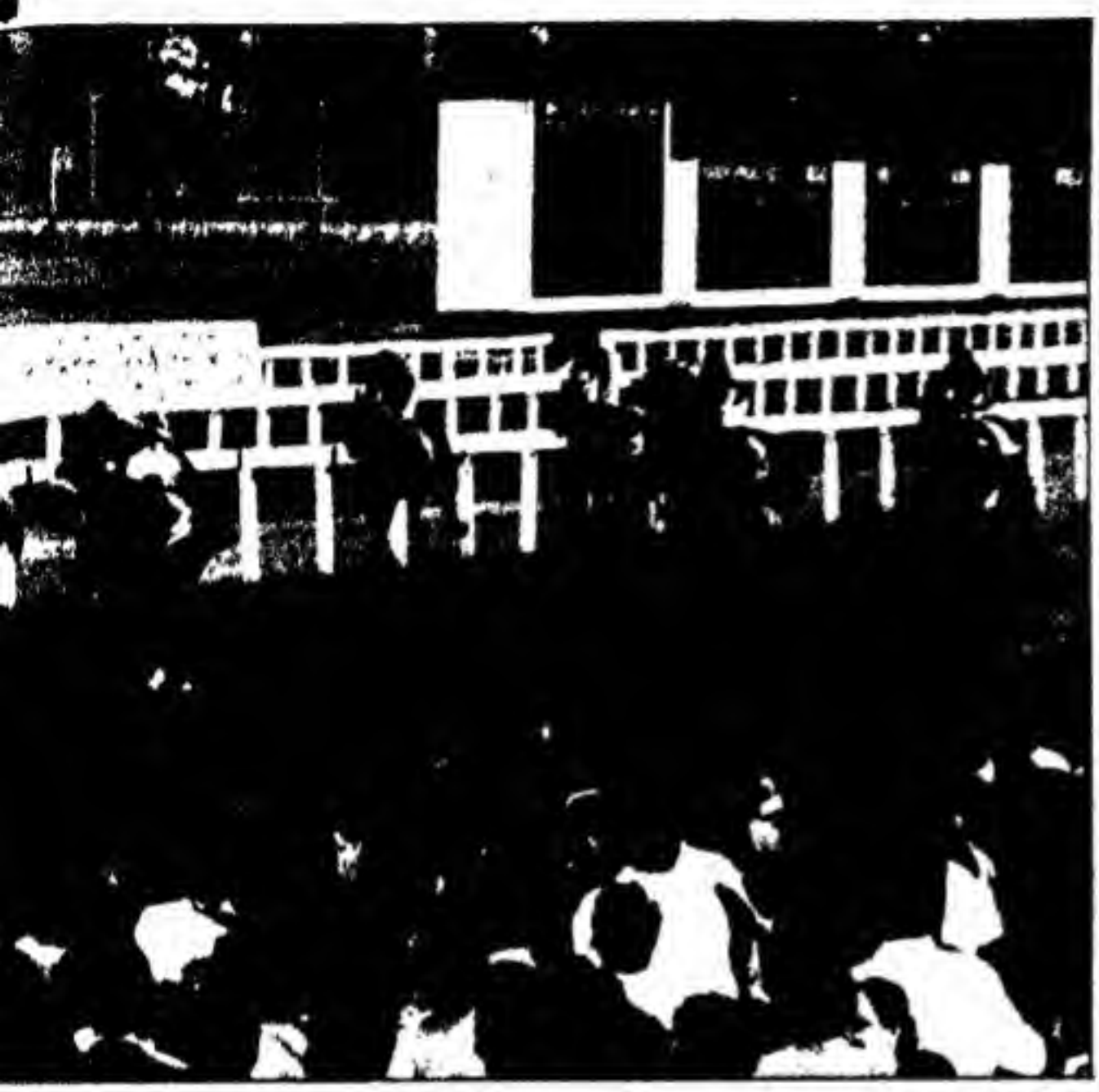
Khaibaz: the agent, the go-between

Lagaibaz: the one betting the money

Khelalal: buyers of tickets or lotteries

Boss or Lala: the kingpin

Numbers **0**—**9** are called Munda; **10**—Dus ka Bindi; **20**—Bees ka Bindi and so on.



on racecourses

cer posted in Bhubaneswar, realised this when in his enthusiasm to nab the culprits he raided a counter at the Old Bus Stand area. He seized bundles of fake lottery tickets and bags of currency notes and arrested some of the agents. Within a year, he was given transfer orders.

Political patronage is indirect — that is, it's unlikely that you'll find a leader owning a *satta* joint or hobnobbing with operators. This is because, since the Seventies, following a series of raids, several dens were closed down. The association now is thus discreet, more in the nature of claiming *hafta* (protection money). With both the police and political leaders playing godfather, there is nothing the *satta* don has to fear.

RAVINDER SHARMA

THE NUMBERS GAME: crowds before a lottery distributor

mobile, with enquiries about the weather and the wicket so as to gauge the outcome of the match. Such interactions are common and thousands of rupees are staked. While the gamblers make a quick buck, it's the game which loses out. Betting is not only on victories, but also on losses.

But this is what gambling is all about — win some, lose some. It's a game which most of us indulge in and something that can never be rooted out completely. Says Sahib Singh, a constable with Delhi Police, "*Arre saab, kaun yeh nahin khelta hai. Aap red light pe rook jaiye aur apne dost se baazi lagaiye ki hamari gaadi bagal ki gaadi se pehle pahunchh jayegi, woh bhi to satta hai.* (Saheb, who doesn't gamble. When at a red light, you bet with your friend that our car will zoom ahead of the adjoining car, you are indulging in *satta*)."

That is an exaggeration, but the instinct to gamble *is* a human instinct. And you can't deny that. •

Pallavi Ghosh/New Delhi with Deshdeep Saxena/Bhopal, Pankaj Adhikari/Calcutta, Naved Zahir/Patna and Surendra Patra/Bhubaneswar

Match-betting is popular as the results are instant. Involvement of players is essential as they are the conduit between the bookies and the bettors

Anincreasingly popular form of gambling, but one played not in dingy rooms but in actual playgrounds, is betting on matches. It differs from traditional *satta* in that it dispenses with any physical manifestations like offices, and the people involved belong to the higher echelons of society. The bettors are players themselves, reporters, officials and bookies.

Following the ban on state lotteries, except in Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, match-betting has become popular as the results are instant.

Stakes are laid on cricket (the most popular), tennis and football matches. Involvement of players is essential as they are the conduit between the bookies and the bettors.

During a particular match in the Caribbeans last year, one member of the touring party would get frequent calls on his

Open to argument

The judgements of match referees have to be reviewed very strictly

World cricket is getting so commercial and the stakes in each encounter are getting so high that the cost of human error is getting to be prohibitive. The time has, perhaps, come for total electronic surveillance of all international matches.

With stump vision and microphones already in use, a computer to gauge the actual direction of a ball when it is interrupted by a batsman's pad could also be employed. Already stumpings and run-out decisions are being provided by cameras. No balls, wides and leg-bye decisions could come in the same way.

Purists will surely cry foul, saying that the essence of the game would be lost if electronic gadgets took over from umpires. But, right now, how much of today's cricket is cricket? Pyjamas have replaced flannels in one version of the game already. A third umpire is ensconced in a TV room, far from the playing pitch. And sponsors and television companies are, for quite some time now, dictating terms and conditions of matches between countries.

There was just such a scenario when Australia faced India in a three-Test series staged in scorching heat. The time was not right, but then itineraries had to be juggled skilfully. They had to include England in West Indies, Pakistan and then Sri Lanka in South Africa and then threesomes in South Africa and India. And all this, between domestic schedules here and elsewhere.

With millions of rupees being invested in all these ventures, sponsors naturally demand adequate compensation in terms of TV support, their advertisements being reached to viewers between overs and whenever a batsman was out. It would certainly not do for them to have umpires make wrong decisions and match referees meting out selective punishment for alleged misdemeanours.

The last one has been the bane of cricket in an increasing number of venues. In India, the otherwise entertaining series was marred by a few wrong decisions by umpires. It is natural, the supervisors being only human.

But not so the match referee. This man, by virtue of having played his cricket when South Africa was in splendid isolation — in the Seventies. Unfortunately, the days of apartheid have perhaps stayed on in his mind.

Peter van der Merwe is one of South Africa's two umpires nominated for duty. He was on duty for the youth internationals in his country and questioned the action of off-spinner Harbhajan Singh. Here, he closely inspected Sourav Ganguly's bat and Nayan Mongia's gloves, to see whether they were regulation size and "un-doctored". Of course he did not think it necessary to check any Australian's cricket gear.

Justice dispensation has to be equal and seen to be equal. Not so in the case of van der Merwe. He talks of "value judgement" which immediately absolves him of the charge of partiality. Or so he would have the world believe.

Trouble started from the first Test at Chennai when Ricky Ponting was adjudged leg before wicket. He clearly

ALOKE MITRA

Sourav Ganguly: did he deserve it?

indicated the ball had touched his bat before hitting his pads. Both Ian Healy and Greg Blewett voiced their displeasure. Shane Warne's appeals for LBW are not merely vociferous, they are intimidating. Staring at the umpire, then at the batsman and back again at the umpire in the same crouching position, sometimes even repeating the appeal.

But it was Sourav who got the flak in Bangalore. TV replays clearly showed that the Adam Dale delivery had touched his bat before hitting the pads. When the umpire lifted his finger, the batsman lifted his bat and hit it on his pads. It was a spontaneous gesture and there was a sense of hopelessness rather than rancour.

Ganguly was summoned. He apologised for his behaviour. Captain Mohammad Azharuddin and manager Anshuman Gaekwad pleaded on his behalf. But the match referee decided to suspend Sourav for one international fixture. The player thus missed the first One-Dayer against Australia.

Ponting, for the same offence, was not even warned or reprimanded. Nor was he pulled up for the use of abusive language on the field and misbehaviour off it. He was thrown out of a discotheque in Peerless Inn on the night it was officially inaugurated by actress Pooja Bhatt. He had misbehaved with some women and was involved in a scuffle with security personnel. If any of these people had taken recourse to law, Ponting would have found himself on a sticky wicket, despite the presence of his protector, Peter van der Merwe.

It is not that match suspensions have never been handed out before. In 1994-95, Brian Lara was suspended for one match against New Zealand and the latter's Ken Rutherford was laid off for two games against South Africa. Salim Malik, protesting against frequent inspection of the ball by the umpires, was sidelined for two matches. This Harare incident was followed by Aamir Sohail throwing his bat in disgust at Hobart. Another Pakistani given the same punishment was Inzamam-ul-Haq, after he hit a spectator during the Sahara Cup in Toronto.

Sourav has the dubious distinction of being the first Indian cricketer to be suspended. He had earlier been fined 25 per cent of his match fees for repeatedly appealing in a match at Johannesburg. There were others, too, who had suffered the same monetary loss.

Peter van der Merwe told the press

Ricky Ponting, for the same offence, was not even warned or reprimanded. Nor was he pulled up for the use of abusive language on the field and misbehaviour off it in the presence of match referee Peter van der Merwe

that he always made a distinction between "dissent" and "disappointment". He told questioning reporters that in order to distinguish between the two, he had to make a "value judgement". His "value" scale had all the Australians on one side and Sourav Ganguly on the other.

The Indian cricket authorities have written to the International Cricket Council, which appoints match referees, complaining about van der Merwe's decision. But if they argue that since Ponting had not been punished Sourav shouldn't be it would be a mistake. Two wrongs don't make a right. So the Ponting issue should be treated differently.

If the Board of Control for Cricket in India asks the ICC to verify whether this match referee had taken a lenient view of Australian players' violation of the code of conduct, it would facilitate action against the South African supervisor.

The ICC can always call for relevant television footage to see if the referee had been just in his dealings. It is part of the organising country's agreement with TV companies to ask for and receive parts of all coverage of matches in any series.

Incidents in all Tests that were controversial could easily be replayed and decisions taken on their basis. The camera and its sound component have already considerably lessened the constant sledging around the batsmen that seemed de rigueur in international matches.

But even in this field, some additions seem to be necessary. Fielders have realised they cannot use swear words in English. So, the South Africans resort to an African tongue, Indians could use Hindi and Pakistanis, Urdu. How long, before translations will be called for?

Decorum in cricket is at a premium in these days of sponsorship. Crass or otherwise, commercialism is here to stay and, with it, each performance is placed under a microscope. This, to determine the income of a player, his saleability and his position in the endorsements market.

Under the circumstances, the value judgements of van der Merwe and his ilk have to be reviewed very strictly. When earnings from one's profession are involved, they can't be left to personal whims.

All of these bring one back to the question of supervision. Human follies and foibles don't really have a place in a professional set-up. The only way out seems to be electronic surveillance. •

Arijit Sen/Calcutta

How not to make billions

The radio can help defuse the population bomb

Distribute radios among Indian women and chances are that fertility rates will plummet sooner than we imagine. This is one of the many findings of a research jointly carried out in some states by the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) in Bombay and the East-West Centre Programme on Population (EWCPP) in Honululu, Hawaii.

A population awareness drive: problem of numbers

A report on 'Wanted and Unwanted Fertility in Selected States of India', published this February by the IIPS, says that in six of the eight states surveyed, "women who have been exposed to family planning messages on radio or television are much more likely to use contraception than women who have not been exposed". The report also cites other studies that had been done earlier and had reached the same conclusion.

The study, done by Sumati Kulkarni, head and professor, department of development studies, IIPS, and Minja Kin Choe, fellow, EWCPP, observes that "in India, where a substantial proportion of women are illiterate, the electronic mass media can play an important role in increasing women's contraceptive use". This was found to be particularly true of states such as Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar, where illiteracy and fertility levels were both found to be high.

In contrast, radio and television played minimal role in popularising contraception in Maharashtra and Kerala — two states that boast of high levels of literacy and social development. The study is based on data gathered by the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) project. The sample included 89,777 "ever-married women" between 13 and 49 in 88,562 households.

Kulkarni and Choe maintain that it is important — and perhaps easier — to reduce unwanted pregnancies in order to stem population growth. The study has revealed that in the four large states of UP, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, women still want three or more children on an average. While this is high enough, the population boom gets an extra fillip from unwanted pregnancies which families would much rather avoid.

"If the family welfare programme succeeds in helping women in these four states to achieve the family size they want, even without changing their family-size desires, fertility will be reduced by 20 to 28 per cent," the authors have argued. And this percentage would translate into whopping numbers given the size of India's population.

"Women who have been exposed to family planning messages on radio or television are much more likely to use contraception than women who have not been exposed," says a recent survey

The situation is particularly grim in UP, they point out. In fact, in the four cow-belt states, it is not quite enough to prevent unwanted pregnancies alone without curbing the filial desire for large families.

Here the problem is quite different from that in Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Maharashtra, where the desired number of children, on an average, is slightly above two — a figure that demographers equate with the "replacement level". But in these three states, too, unwanted births are said to be still quite high.

In comparison, Kerala presents a striking contrast. This southern state, with its 89.8 per cent literacy level, has already achieved a low fertility level usually associated with developed countries. In Kerala, according to the study, the total marital fertility rate among Hindus, Muslims and other communities was found to be 2.08, 3.23 and 2.30 respectively. And the desired fertility rate was even lower: 1.81, 2.80 and 1.96.

The data have, in fact, revealed a consistent decline in birth rates with rising levels in education. And this is true of all states, including those of the Hindi heartland, though the rates vary.

In three of the four high-fertility states, urban women were found to be more inclined to use contraceptives. This was the case in states with moderate or low fertility as well. What baffled the researchers, however, was a curious response from Maharashtra. "There, urban women are less likely to use contraception than rural women," says the report. The study doesn't provide any clear explanation for this unusual behaviour, and merely states that "more in-depth studies are necessary to identify the causes".

But one thing is amply clear: that education and awareness make a world of difference. •

Anish Gupta/Calcutta

Earlier it was television that relied on film-based programming to a large extent. But now films seem to be taking the lead from television.

Anybody who has any doubts on that score only needs to have a look at Anil Kapoor's latest film *Gharwalli Baharwalli*, and the title song sequence of the movie. It looks less like a Hindi film and more like the video of the Acqua song, *I'm a Barbie Girl*. The set is a direct take-off on the backdrop of the Barbie song, and even the clothes that Anil Kapoor and his two wives wear are in the same colours and styles as that worn by the members of the band.

We know that imitation is the best form of flattery. But must they be quite so blatant about it?

The resistance to Kajol in the Devgan household has finally broken down. Ajay's family, which until now had been slightly leery of a filmi *bahu*, have now embraced Kajol with open arms. They miss no opportunity to point out how friendly and warm the actress is, and how well she fits into their family.

So, does that mean that wedding bells will soon be ringing out for the happy couple? Watch this space.

All those who were wondering who the young man who came to receive Akshaye Khanna's award on his behalf at the Lux Zee Cine Awards nite can rest easy. We have the answer for them: this was the young son of Akshaye's secretary.

But why didn't Akshaye bother to turn up? Apparently, it's because he was irritated by the behaviour of the anchors at an earlier awards function, who peppered him with questions when he went to collect his award. Khanna refused to answer any of the queries, and went ahead with his speech of thanks. But apparently, he swore right there and then that he wouldn't attend any other awards function.

And he's sticking by that resolution — at least, until now, he is.

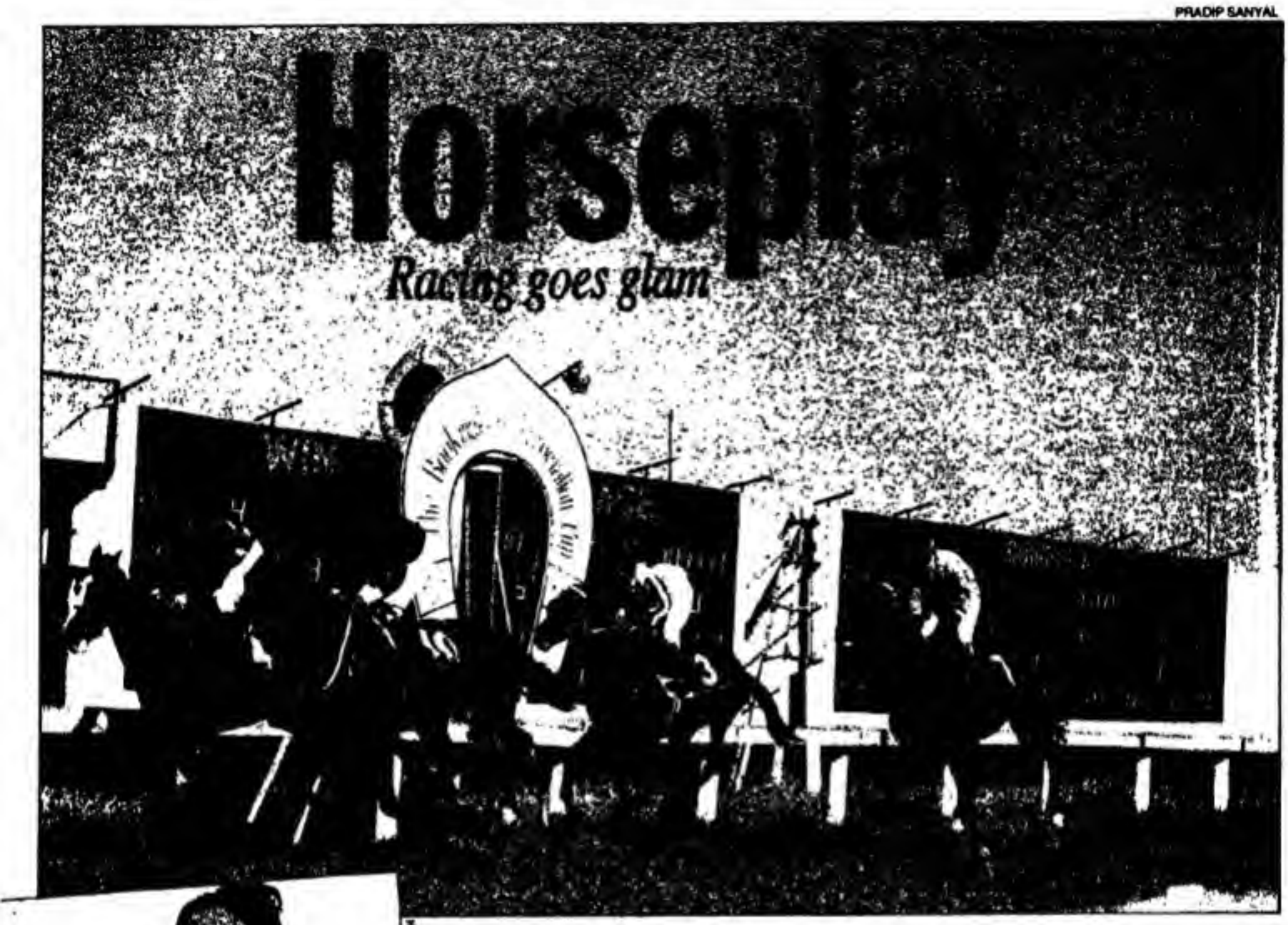
Even though Zeenat Aman and Mazhar Khan have officially divorced, they are still closer to one another than many other married couples. Even now, Aman packs a *dabba* of home-made lunch for her ex-husband on special occasions. And the two of them meet up very often so that their kids can feel like they are part of a happy family.

That should serve as a good example to some other warring couples in the industry. •

PRADIP SANYAL

Horseplay

Racing goes glam



KISHORE ROYCHOWDHURY

Show-stopper: fashion on horseback

Think about a day at the races, and you think about *My Fair Lady*. Eliza Doolittle's baptism by fire: to try and secure a berth for herself in 'decent society'. She messed it up, of course. Couldn't say the right things. More importantly, couldn't even *appear* to be at the right place.

This is the world of horse racing: the sport of the royals, the creme de la creme. In India, it was always considered 'fashionable' to be seen at the races. Even if the Beautiful People had no clue as to what was going on. But in today's world — where 'good time' is just a feather-touch away — wasn't racing getting just a wee bit boring? After all, how long could you go on looking good and pretending that you're having a ball?

Enter: enterprising event management organisations, who in consultation with corporate houses (official sponsors of the races) decided that it was time to change the face of horse-racing in India.

Recently, ITC hosted the Classic Indian Turf Invitation Cup — the biggest racing event in India (prize money: Rs 5 lakh) — in Hyderabad. Race-goers were in for a real surprise. Current Miss India Lymaraina D'Souza and supermodels Bipasha Basu, Madhu Sapre, Sheetal Mallar, Meghana Reddy, Noyonika Chatterjee added a different dimension to the event with a fashion show choreographed by Sangeeta Chopra. The horsd'e oeuvre was a runaway success.

"Our association with horse-racing goes back to 1983 when we first started with our sponsorships," says Samindra Roy, group brand manager, ITC. "Today, we are looking at a changing scenario. People want more out of the sport. So we are glamourising it. But don't worry, we'll never cheapen it. Quality has

always been our forte — because racing is a premium sport and Classic is a premium brand."

Although the racing circuit has its corporate benefactors — most notably United Breweries, the Taj Group, Williamson Magor, *The Hindu*... — ITC is miles ahead. "We will continue to dominate the racing scene in India," says Roy. "And we'll always believe in adding to the value of our trademarks."

If it is the sponsors who are putting in the moolah (ITC has spent something around Rs 1.2 crore over the last one year), the event-managers are the men (and women) behind the show. "What we did at Hyderabad had happened in Bombay, but on a much lesser scale," says Omer Haidar of Showhouse, the company which scripted the success story at the Invitation Cup extravaganza. "What we tried to create was a 'carnival' atmosphere like the way it is on the international circuit."

In Australia, for instance, the day of the Melbourne Cup has been declared a national holiday in the city. And the participation is not just from within city limits. Visitors from Brisbane and Sydney constitute a substantial part of the crowd. The Melbourne madness is infectious and electrifying. The reason: everyone wants to be part of the event. "We have been trying to get a lot more people interested in the races," explains Haidar. "And not just for the betting or the sport, but for the ambience."

PRADIP SANYAL

Says Omer Haidar of Showhouse: "We have been trying to get a lot more people interested in the races. Not just for the betting or the sport, but for the ambience"

Hyderabad was not ITC's and Showhouse's first foray into 'glamourising' the races. At the Calcutta Derby, last year, the curtain-raiser was as glam as it can possibly get. Leading models did the catwalk. For all those race-regulars, it was much more than just another day out at the Royal Calcutta Turf Club (RCTC).

"This was ITC's brainchild, we don't want to take credit for it," admits Vineet Verma, CEO and secretary of the RCTC. "It was a great surprise for us. Personally, I think it is a very welcome trend."

As the club administrator, Verma wants more and more people to popularise the sport. "But that can't happen unless the layman, who doesn't really know much about horse racing, is given 'incentives'. And what better way than this? ITC has set the ball rolling. Now many other houses are keen to follow suit."

The creme de la creme: all roads lead to the races

KISHORE ROYCHOWDHURY

There has been some negative feedback from the die-hard punters who are not comfortable with the introduction of semi-clad women into the sporting arena

But how are the *original* race buffs reacting to this new kind of 'value addition'? "Overall, the response has been extremely positive," feels Haidar. "However, there has been some negative feedback from the die-hard punters who are not comfortable with the introduction of glamour into the sporting arena." Verma agrees: "It would be wrong to say that the entire racing fraternity was overenthusiastic about the fashion shows. There are some who don't appreciate it."

Like Samit Sikdar, who would rather root for horses than for leggy women: "I go to the races for 'serious betting'. I really don't know why all these fashion shows are happening. The organisers are forgetting that there's something called sanctity of sport. If some models go to a cricket ground and start parading, will that be acceptable? We mean business here and we would rather not have semi-clad women horsing around."

Such minor hiccups apart, certain pertinent questions remain: does all this take away anything from the sport? What is it like for the professionals in the circuit?

"Fantastic," says former tennis ace-turned-tennis-coach-cum-horse-owner Enrico Piperno. "The spirit should be: enjoy. We've had enough of racing being associated with gambling. After all, these kind of added attractions can only make people even more interested in the sport. And let's not get stuffy about the 'glamour' angle: it's become part and parcel of Indian life, so why all these pretensions?"

Ditto feels Richard Alford, the most-sought-after horse trainer in Calcutta: "I welcome the move. Nothing like having good-looking women around."

And what about the jockeys? Don't they feel that the models are stealing their thunder? "No way," says Alford. "They are happy. Happy because a lot more people are getting to see them."

And the people are happy because they are getting a lot more to see! •

Sushmita Bose/Calcutta with G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

Star attractions: the race-track as ramp

ORISSA

The resignation drama

Several ministers of the J.B. Patnaik government put in their papers amidst controversy

After the high-voltage drama of the elections in Orissa, it's now the turn of the J.B. Patnaik government, its trials and its tribulations, to take political centre-stage. Following the Congress' poor showing in the Lok Sabha polls — the ruling party managed to bag just five seats, while the BJP-BJD combine won 16 — it was obvious that heads would roll. And that they did, a dozen and more.

By the time the dust raised by the electoral debacle was settling down, 15 members of the J.B. Patnaik ministry had resigned. But not without fuelling another raging controversy. Not all were convinced about the party line: that the ministers were putting in their papers to give their chief minister the opportunity to revamp his Cabinet and rejuvenate the state government.

That all was not well within the beleaguered state Congress was all too evident during the marathon Congress Legislative Party (CLP) meet on 20 March. The six-hour-long session 'of introspection' was held in the conference hall (room no. 54) of the Orissa Legislative Assembly. A total of 62 MLAs, including 20 ministers and two deputy chief ministers (Basanta Biswal and Hemananda Biswal) were present at the meet, which was presided over by chief minister J.B. Patnaik.

"The meeting was convened to discuss the causes of the defeat of the party in the just-concluded mid-term polls and find solutions to regain the lost ground in Orissa, which was the fort of the Congress party," explained an MLA from Kendujhar district.

But disputes, rather than discussions, dominated proceedings. The battle-lines were clearly drawn as the Patnaik-backers and the Patnaik-baiters slugged it out. The first salvo was fired by Netrananda Mallick. The minister, reportedly, demanded the chief minister's resignation from the post of Orissa Pradesh Congress Committee (OPCC) president. "Remaining in both the posts, you are not finding time to concentrate on the party affairs," Mallick told Patnaik.

Mallick went on to accuse some of his colleagues of "sabotaging" the party's chances by "working against the party's candidates in the elections", and the CM of pampering them. He was referring, in particular, to senior PCC vice-president Anant Prasad Sethy, who, allegedly, spoilt the chances of Congress candidate Murlidhar Jena (who is close to Basanta Biswal) at Bhadrak for his own political gains. Sethy is the foster son of Jayanti Patnaik, wife of J.B. Patnaik, a Rajya Sabha member, and a ministerial aspirant. While Mallick did not attack Sethy directly, a couple of MLAs from Balasore district were openly critical of him.

The Patnaik lobby, led by the minister for women and child development, Bijaylaxmi Sahoo, defended Sethy, stating that it was not the fault of any one individual but "all corrupt ministers" that the Congress had become "unpopular". Sahoo was backed by Jaynarayan Mohanty, Padmalochan Panda, Kedar Samantray and others. "Let all the ministers resignand let the chief minister reorganise and revamp his ministry again with persons of integrity," they hollered.

As if on cue, industry minister Niranjan Pattanaik produced his resignation letter from his pocket and handed it over to the chief minister. It was apparent that the entire resignation drama had been stage-managed by the CM's camp to pave the way for change. The lead role, of course, went to Niranjan Pattanaik, elder brother of J.B. Patnaik's son-in-law. While the industry minister is a vocal critic of Basanta Biswal, he is quite close to Hemananda Biswal. While refuting charges that the entire episode was pre-planned, Niranjan Pattanaik explained his 'readymade' resignation letter by saying that he had come prepared "for anything".

TURBULENCE: *chief minister J.B. Patnaik*

Once the industry minister put in his papers, several other ministers followed suit: Prasanna Das, Netrananda Mallick, Ramakant Mishra, Jagannath Rout, Rabindra Kumar Sethy, Harihar Swain, Kishore Chand Patel, Suresh Kumar Routray, S.K. Matlub Ali, Jagannath Pattanaik and Navin Chandra Narayan Das. Two other ministers, Amarnath Pradhan and Bijoylaxmi Sahoo had left the meeting just before the resignation drama was enacted.

MAN IN THE MIDDLE: *J.B. Patnaik, flanked by the two deputy CMs*

While deputy CM (no. 2) Hemananda Biswal did not resign at the CLP meeting, later that night he announced that he had "resigned earlier" and was ready to "resign again", owning moral responsibility for the poll debacle. The next day, he told SUNDAY, "Yes, I have also resigned and I want that the CM should do something for the better health of the Congress."

But deputy CM (no. 1) Basanta Biswal and his loyalists refused to resign at the CLP meet, despite repeated (reported) threats from some of the CM's men that they would not be allowed to leave the conference hall if they did not quit their Cabinet posts. Though Biswal refused to comment, a senior minister of his group (on the condition of anonymity) told SUNDAY: "We, the ministers of the deputy CM's camp, had all information about the drama which was going to be organised. They wanted to create an atmosphere so that they could obtain the resignation of Mr Biswal. Then they could have divested him of his finance portfolio, just as they had humiliated Mr K.C. Lenka earlier."

The chief minister lent an intriguing twist to the tale by declaring in the Assembly that "no minister has resigned and there is no crisis". Replying to questions raised by the Opposition JD, BJD, BJP and some Independent MLAs, J.B. Patnaik stated that, "The entire Cabinet is in right order. Every party has a right to introspect and that was what the ruling party had done. Whatever crisis is there, it has been created by the media people." This, after so many of his ministers had gone public about their resignations!

But this is anything but a closed chapter now. The Congress high command has asked the chief minister to go to Delhi with all the 15 resignation letters that he has received.

Meanwhie, the 'pro-change' lobby is carrying on its efforts to obtain as many signatures as possible to pressurise Basanta Biswal and his men into resigning. This, despite the fact that the state CLP secretary, Ganeswar Behera, has admitted that the resignation drama has caused a lot of harm to the party. "If anybody or any group applies pressure on the other group of ministers to resign, then it would only portray the party in a poor light," said Behera. •

Surendra Patra/Bhubaneswar

For Naga nationhood

Isak Chisi Swu blasts the Indian authorities during the republic day celebrations of the GPRN

The 19th republic day celebrations of the Government of the People's Republic of Nagaland (GPRN) were held at the council headquarters on 21 March, 1998. It was on 21 March, 1980, that the GPRN was formed and a new constitution was "dedicated to the nation".

The day-long ceremonies were attended by hundreds of Naga Army cadres, both male and female, in full military gear: uniformed and armed with sophisticated weapons. A galaxy of kilonsers (ministers), deputy kilonsers, Naga Army officials were also there, as were members of some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and about 3,000 villagers from the area. The celebrations began and ended with prayers. The main function got underway with the flag-hoisting, followed by speeches, some cultural items and a press conference.

It was, of course, GPRN president Isak Chisi Swu's speech, read out by 'home minister' K. Hurray, that was of utmost significance. Wishing all those present "victorious peace", Swu said that thousands of Nagas have shed

IT IS THE CAUSE: *GPRN leaders*

their blood for the "redemption of Nagalim (Naga identity)" and "thousands more are queuing up to sacrifice their lives for the nation".

Swu asserted that the GPRN was "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people". He expressed "profound gratitude" to various Naga organisations for "successfully boycotting the India-imposed elections on 16 and 23 February 1998". The GPRN chief also took the opportunity to convey "a very big Thank You to all friends across the globe, our immediate neighbouring peoples, and a good number of Indians for their unreserved demonstration of solidarity with the Naga people in the search for

SIKKIM

Promises to keep

CM Chamling faces administrative challenges

The ruling Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) has consolidated its position by retaining the lone Lok Sabha seat in the strategic border state of Sikkim. But chief minister Pawan Kumar Chamling is struggling to implement his government's pro-Sikkimese policies and programmes. At least that's what the recent mass-transfer of bureaucrats suggests.

The chief minister is determined to see that the "son-of-the-soil" policy, ironically initiated by his predecessor and enemy number one Nar Bahadur Bhandari, is implemented in order to gain the people's confidence.

The present shake-up comes close on the heels of last year's reshuffling of 64 senior officials, including 29 state power department engineers. This time, Pawan Kumar Chamling has transferred over 70 middle-level bureaucrats and engineers. In an obvious move to appease the state civil service, four of its cadres have been elevated to the rank of secretaries.

But a lot remains to be done. In the run-up to the Lok Sabha polls, Chamling had vowed to fight corruption at every level and cleanse the system. That, of course, is easier said than done. To keep his word, he will first have to set his own house in order. No state government department is free from the malaise of corruption, a fact which the chief minister himself acknowledges.

The culture of ostentatious living, a lifestyle fostered by the 14-year-long Bhandari regime, is too deeply entrenched among the powers that be. To bring about a change, Chamling will have to ensure that his 15-member ministry functions as a coherent whole. He will also have to ensure popular participation in the process of detecting, exposing and curbing corruption.

FIST OF FURY: *Pawan Kumar Chamling*

Another disturbing trend has been the involvement of some SDF members in extortion rackets. Chamling is alarmed and aggrieved by reports of partymen 'raising funds' from the business community. "Some of the SDF leaders and workers are losing their commitment to the party's ideology and working for personal gains. This is our biggest problem. In fact, it is a serious setback," admits the SDF supremo.

While the administrative challenges remain, Chamling has the advantage of knowing that he is in a politically sound position. His SDF, after its meteoric rise to power in 1994, has weathered many a political storm. In 1992, he had floated the party and was its sole representative in the Assembly. Today, the ruling SDF has 26 MLAs in the 32-member House.

Pawan Kumar Chamling will also be banking on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition at the Centre to back his play. The SDF supporters here are confident that the party and the people of Sikkim will be "rewarded" by Atal Behari Vajpayee's government in Delhi.

"Under the able leadership of Pawan Kumar Chamling and with the blessings of the BJP government in Delhi, there will be political stability and economic progress in Sikkim," says one SDF-loyalist. •

G. Chettri/Gangtok

honourable peace through political solution to the 50-year-old war of resistance". He thanked all those who "have generously contributed to the financial requirement and other needs of the NSCN for its sustenance and in propagating the cause of the Naga Nation across the world".

Isak Chisi Swu blasted the Indian government for its "shameless imposition" of the "bogus elections" on "the unwilling Naga people". He asserted that such "forced elections" are "absolutely unacceptable now and shall be so for all time to come".

Condemning the "deplorable thirst for dirty wealth and evil influence" of a few "scrounges", he accused these "troublemakers" of ignoring the "overwhelming wishes of the people" and remaining indifferent to the "aspirations of the people".

The GPRN chief then went on to warn the Indian authorities to "abandon the useless display of wanton arrogance and insincerity" as the GPRN was "superbly fit and always prepared to take up any challenge". He explained that in recent months, under the influence of "misplaced perception and obvious fantasy that the Nagas could be intimidated", certain "short-sighted units of the occupational Indian Army had impudently violated the ceasefire", leading to the death of many and kidnapping of 24 personnel of the Naga Army plus the atrocious and murder of many innocent Nagas.

But Swu, in his speech, also admitted that "the overall mood of India appears to be free of significant opposition to an amicable resolution of the problem as a result of internal political instability."

BIHAR

Rebel with a cause

Dilip Verma: conscience-keeper of the Bihar Assembly

He is Bihar's Man in Black. He has been christened 'Bhaloo' (bear) by former CM Laloo Prasad Yadav and Co. He is the Bihar Assembly's troublemaker-cum-conscience keeper. Enter: Dilip Verma, the one-man army of the Champaran Vikas Party (CVP), the MLA from Sikta, dressed in black kurta-pyjama.

Dilip Verma hit the headlines on the first day of the Bihar Assembly after being caught bang in the middle of a stormy session. Trouble began when the CVP man raised the question of the *dhoti*-sari scam. He was protesting the non-distribution of Rs 200-crore worth of *dhotis* and saris among people below the poverty line. Though Laloo had announced this 'grand' scheme, some three years ago, the clothes have continued to rot in various warehouses all over the state.

As Verma rushed to the well of the House and came to a stop in front of chief minister Rabri Devi, armed with a *dhoti* and a sari, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) members rose to the occasion. First off the blocks was road construction minister Ilyas Hussain, who tackled Verma, snatched away the clothes he was carrying and threw them away.

Then, all hell broke loose. Several other RJD ministers and MLAs joined the action. Vikram Kuer, Gajendra Prasad Singh, Shiv Shankar Yadav, Ramesh Prasad Yadav, Dilip Yadav, Lalit Yadav, etc., pounced upon Dilip Verma and began bashing him up. The poor CVP man was slapped, punched, kicked and pushed around.

Dilip Verma was finally rescued by JDLP leader Ganesh Yadav, Samata Party leaders Vrishen Patel and Shivanand Tiwary, and two ministers of the Rabri Devi Cabinet, Awadh Bihari Choudhary and Sitaram Singh. Angry RJD leaders insisted that Dilip Verma had "insulted the lady chief minister" by offering her the *dhoti* and asking for her sari! Verma, of course, swears that all he did was show the *dhoti* and sari as a symbol of protest and ask the CM to distribute them.

The next day, under severe pressure from the Opposition, led by BJP leader Sushil Kumar Modi, the chief minister apologised for the unruly behaviour of her men in the House.

This is not the first time that Dilip Verma has been in the eye of a storm. He has consistently raised issues of corruption and administrative malpractices in the House. On 30 October, 1994, he was arrested while protesting the government's apathy towards Home Guards. His one-point agenda in the Assembly has been to "expose the Laloo-Rabri government's wrongdoing".

HOME RULE: *Laloo Yadav with Rabri Devi*

"Bihar is being raped by Laloo"

Dilip Verma lashes out at the former CM

SUNDAY: Why did the RJD ministers bash you up in the Assembly?

Dilip Verma: What can I say? *Goondagardi ka ngaj hain.* I had gone to the CM, Rabri Devi, to ask her about the pending scheme of *dhoti*-sari. The RJD men started shouting that I had behaved indecently with the lady CM. And then they beat me up.

But then, what is new about this? The JD (now RJD) ministers have always been attacking their political rivals to try and silence them. Previously, it was Laloo Yadav, now it's his wife.

Q: But why have you been made the prime target?

A: I have won the polls twice, both times against the *'Laloo lehar'*. Time and again, I have raised burning issues in the House that have always rattled Laloo Yadav. I raised the issue of price-hike of sugarcane and demanded restarting of all sugar mills. Then, on 16 March, 1994, I was the first member to point out the infamous fodder scam. I raised the issue of *'ek scooterpar saat gaay'* (seven buffaloes on one scooter).

Q: Why is your anger directed against Laloo and Rabri?

A: See, it is just not fair. Laloo wants everybody to study in Chirwaha Vidyalaya while he himself sends his daughters to Tata Medical College and to Mayo College. This is wrong and I oppose it.

Q: How does it feel to be in a House where Rabri Devi is the CM?

A: I am ashamed to be there. I go there because I want to raise certain issues of development.

Q: Does [illegible]

A: What else [illegible] stopped on [illegible] ed the fodder [illegible] let Laloo [illegible] full assurance [illegible]

Q: What is [illegible]

A: [illegible]

CLEAN-UP DRIVE: *Dilip Verma highlights corruption issues*

But there is more to Dilip Verma than being just a rabble-rouser. His popularity has been proved by his two successive victories in the Assembly elections, against all odds.

A visit to his government flat (A-102) on Serpentine Road tells you that Dilip Verma is a politician with a difference. This houses the Amresh Prasad Verma Integrated Rural Development Society (IRDS), established by the MLA in 1991, in the memory of his father. Instead of sycophants, you come across hordes of people from Champaran, East Champaran and West Champaran districts of north Bihar who flock to Dilip Verma for help.

The help comes in various forms: free medical treatment, free medicines, free lodging, free food, money for conveyance, etc. On an average, the monthly expenditure is around Rs 20-25,000. With no government grants forthcoming, the MLA and his friends "pool in the money for the noble cause".

"Sometimes, more than a hundred patients turn up. No one is allowed to go without proper treatment. The MLA himself oversees everything," says Amresh Kumar of IRDS. "*Malik* (Verma) is saving my life by getting an operation done. He is like god," says Noorul Hoda of Bardahin village in Sikta Assembly constituency, who suffers from a serious bone deformation in the leg. Besides this hospital, Verma also distributes tricycles among the handicapped, sponsors eye-camps, and is now planning to open up a blind school.

All this has made him hugely popular among the poor. Says 'do-good' Verma: "For me, winning the election is no big deal. My people know what work I'm doing. They say, 'You just stay at home and we will vote for you'. All I can say is that one should not lose touch with the ground realities and help them who helped me or any other MLA in becoming an MLA." •

Naved Zahir/Patna

And the Oscar goes to...

There's nothing quite like the Academy Awards nite

There's nothing quite like the Oscars. This feeling remains while planned once every year, everytime one [illegible] watches the awards ceremony which Doordarshan brings us live. (Or almost live: even as the first Asian in A Leading Role, Jack Nicholson, was walking across the stage to accept his statuette, the Best Actor he A Sup[illegible] scoring Role, Robin Williams, was talking to CNN, post [illegible] about how he got 'Hero-time lucky').

The speeches are pure schmaltz, issuing forth from those who are chosen to give the awards every, all shook who haven't been nominated, putting a brave face on it, and from those who got to wear their sweaty paws around the coveted trophy. It's all one big circus. Everyone sup[illegible] ear, clown, and clowns, said Billy Crystal cracks wise.

[illegible] is the sheer spectacle of [illegible] a word. Awesome. The [illegible] the coverage, all about the attention [illegible] from the hundreds of celeb. hounds from [illegible] the [illegible] year's batch, was, of course, the Titanic. James Cam[illegible] unbelievable film about [illegible] crowned 'I am the king of [illegible] enamored by the [illegible] the rest of it [illegible] Hollywood [illegible]

SUNDAY WEEK

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 5 APRIL, 1998

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

Financial matters will be well within your grasp. You will manoeuvre yourself into a strong position in business and commercial negotiations. Lucrative deals can be forged. Your powers of expression are likely to be more lucid than ever. Communication with large groups is starred.

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

A social do gets you out of your shell and you look forward to having a lively time. Sporting involvement with others keeps you active, but not too personally wrapped up. Someone shows an interest in your social scene and this could be a good excuse to live it up; just don't overdo things.

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

Send off applications if you come across something worthwhile. But it is advisable to think deeply about jobs that are offered to you, as the prospects they contain will be almost nil. Trouble may be brewing at home. You may have to work hard to preserve the peace. Do not lose patience.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

Carefully-made schedule sheets will help you keep appointments or meetings from overlapping or cancelling each other out. Expending your energy over too wide a field can mean that nothing gets done, although a lot of effort is wasted.

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

Power is meant to be used, so if you cannot do things yourself, appreciate those who have the necessary means to do them. A breakdown of communications can leave you at a dead-end. Help out someone in need. Hypocrisy cannot be maintained for very long. Don't travel too far.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

Friends can be around you without meaning anything. A quiet game of cards or some club activity may amuse you for a while. Financial dealings can be slow. Major dealers in the market will set trends. You may feel that you're not really needed.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

An offer of accommodation should be considered. Look after your resources; you have to depend on them at a later date. There may be a bonus at hand, which may appear to be a lot but will soon dwindle. So you must make plans and shopping-lists before you go all out and spend it.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

Don't bite off more than you can chew: don't take on more than you can handle. Your energy is likely to run out in the middle of a busy schedule, so keep your plans simple. Patience is crucial for the success of current undertakings.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

Remain detached, yet have things under control. Involvement is not necessary. Children may have their flings within limits. If you show them that you trust them, they will be appreciative. Contemplate studying, which can be completed if you apply yourself. Travelling can bring results.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

Stick to the straight and narrow. Confrontations with the authorities can lead to extremely unfavourable consequences. People may try to steal your thunder. Stand up for your rights. Outings with loved ones can be delightful. People from overseas or distant places may fascinate you.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

Fight for your rights and push yourself to the fore. You can be overly retiring and shy to your own detriment. Others will have their own interests in mind and are unlikely to put in a good word on your behalf. Inhibitions and fears will have to be overcome if any progress is to be made.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

Don't rake up the past. There is no point taking yourself to task for past errors and indiscretions. Feeling bad about past misdemeanours will do nothing to right them. And if you haven't realised all this by now, then you probably never will. •

Lull before the storm

Renuka Chowdhury is chafing at the bit and itching to get even with Chandrababu Naidu.

She was hoping that the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) would nominate her to the Rajya Sabha again. In this she expected to be supported by the BJP, which she helped to bring closer to Naidu.

Instead, not only did the Andhra Pradesh chief minister and the smartest boy on the Opposition block today, not nominate her, the BJP

Renuka Chowdhury: angry with Naidu

advised her to take it easy and put off unfurling the banner of revolt.

Chowdhury has thus submitted to the counsel of her friend Vasundhara Raje Scindia, who's been telling her to cool it for the moment. Vasundhara also arranged a meeting with Rajasthan chief minister Bhairon Singh Shekhawat who told Chowdhury that anything she said at this point would go in favour of the Congress.

But never one to keep mum for long, her outburst is just a matter of time.

HEARD IN THE MANDI HOUSE

The story of our lives is '*Gill to pagal hai*'.

A DD EMPLOYEE ON ADVERTISING CURBS BY THE PRASAR BHARATI BOARD

Triple action

Why did Sonia Gandhi take her children along with her to the states when she was campaigning?

Everyone said it was because she was grooming them to enter politics. In fact, it was nothing of the sort.

Sonia Gandhi, Priyanka and Rahul, all get Special Protection Group (SPG) security. The total number of SPG men deployed to guard them adds up to truly awesome security.

The children had already complained to the then Prime Minister, I.K. Gujral, that there was a threat to Sonia Gandhi's life and her security must be reviewed and increased. While that was done, the family decided that if the security of all of them was added up, it would provide the kind of cover Sonia Gandhi needed.

Which is why when she went to Punjab, Sonia Gandhi took both Rahul and Priyanka with her because then the family got security cover three times each one is entitled to.

Sonia Gandhi: under heavy security

CHECK-LIST

Making sense of politics in Haryana: who wants what

O.P. Chautala: Appears to be holding all the aces at this moment. The BJP is beholden to Chautala as he supported the BJP government at the Centre without any conditions. But it won't be long before the conditions are out in the open and the BJP has to tell Chautala that it can't abandon Bansi Lal.

Bansi Lal: The chief minister and the Haryana Vikas Party chief did badly in the elections, and wasn't of much use to the BJP. But he's the BJP's pre-election electoral ally. Everyone is gunning for him — he has to decide how he's going to play it.

B.S. Hooda: The chief of the Haryana Pradesh Congress Committee can't decide who the bigger enemy is: Bansi Lal or Bhajan Lal, former chief minister of his own party. At this moment, he's training his guns on Bansi; but he'll turn on Bhajan in a matter of time.

Bhajan Lal: The big gun of Haryana, he's now concentrating on consolidating his position. Not to be underestimated.

The disobedient Akali

Prem Singh Lalpura is making waves in the Akali Dal.

After a year of peace and quiet, Lalpura has set the cats among the pigeons by demanding that he be sworn in as a minister *before* he takes oath as an MP.

Lalpura's anxiety stems from the fact that he is having to quit his Assembly seat to enter Lok Sabha. He doesn't think it is a worthwhile sacrifice unless he has got some compensation at the Centre.

The Akali Dal is so annoyed at him that it has served a showcause notice on him for violating the whip that he give up the Assembly seat without even waiting for Prakash Singh Badal who is undergoing surgery in the US.

Lalpura is showing them the thumb so far — he won the Tarn Taran Lok Sabha seat by a margin of over 1.5 lakh votes, the highest in Punjab, in addition to holding the Assembly seat. So he figures he's the master of the universe.

But he may be in for a rude shock if he disobeys the Akali Dal high command. •

DELHI DIARY

Missing the bus

Sartaj Singh, HRD minister in Atal Behari Vajpayee's 13-day government, MP from Hoshangabad and the man who defeated Arjun Singh, is very unhappy.

He hasn't been made a minister.

Sartaj Singh has to be the most truly secular Sikh in Parliament. He can't have had more than 2,000 Sikh votes in Hoshangabad, and yet managed to defeat a stalwart like Arjun Singh. He was expecting to be named a minister, but found the names of other Sikhs being called out — Sukhbir Singh, S.S. Barnala, Buta Singh, etc., but not his own.

His friends had told him that if there was anyone worthy of a ministership it was he. After all, Badal's son was made a minister because of his father. Buta Singh is a *mazhabi* Sikh who had won from Jalore, a reserved constituency. Barnala was a candidate of the Akalis. It was only Sartaj Singh who had beaten back pseudo-secularists both in the Congress and from his own party.

But when Vajpayee realised that the 'quota' of Sikhs was filled, he dropped Sartaj Singh. Several Punjab newspapers have noted this surrender. Singh is hoping to find a berth in the second round.

Out in the cold

Poor Santosh Mohan Deb within a few weeks of losing the Lok Sabha election, he has now gone and lost the Rajya Sabha seat as well.

There's a lesson in all this, Mrs. Gandhi — Indira, not Sonia — used to keep defeated Lok Sabha MPs on ice for at least three years before [illegible] to the [illegible]. Similarly

HEARD IN THE CENTRAL HALL

Q: Why is Chandrababu Naidu like the Pope?

A: Because he believes abstinence is the greatest virtue.

A CONGRESS MP, BEFORE THE VOTE OF CONFIDENCE OF THE BJP GOVERNMENT

Santosh Mohan Deb: a defeated man

Rajiv Gandhi had decided that in deference to the mandate of the people, no MP who had lost a Lok Sabha election would be nominated to Rajya Sabha for at least a year.

Here, Deb didn't even wait three weeks after the people rejected him for the Lok Sabha. There was so much resentment in the party about Sonia Gandhi's decision to support defeated MPs that Deb lost because of his own party.

Not all of this is Sonia Gandhi's fault. The push to nominate Deb, Oscar Fernandes (who lost Lok Sabha but won Rajya Sabha) came from Arjun Singh, who, having been defeated in the Lok Sabha election from Hoshangabad wanted to use Deb's case as a precedent. This was not to be!

The RS elections from MP are to be held in July.

CHECK-LIST

Dreadful duos: formidable two-member teams in Parliament

[redacted]

We'll [illegible] Sonia Gandhi has learnt anything from history.

Calling the shots

Who was responsible for axing Jaswant Singh?

The same person who was responsible for axing Ram Naik from the list of Cabinet ministers — Pramod Mahajan.

That L.K. Advani told Vajpayee he was not in favour of making Jaswant Singh a minister, helped. Advani cautioned Vajpayee against violating the people's mandate so soon after an election.

But Mahajan had already told everyone he wasn't going to be a minister because he had lost the elec-

Pramod Mahajan: power behind the throne

tion. This was both a signal and warning.

The results of his endeavours are clear, though Singh has been made deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, an important post though somewhat non-political one. Mahajan, for [illegible] the power behind

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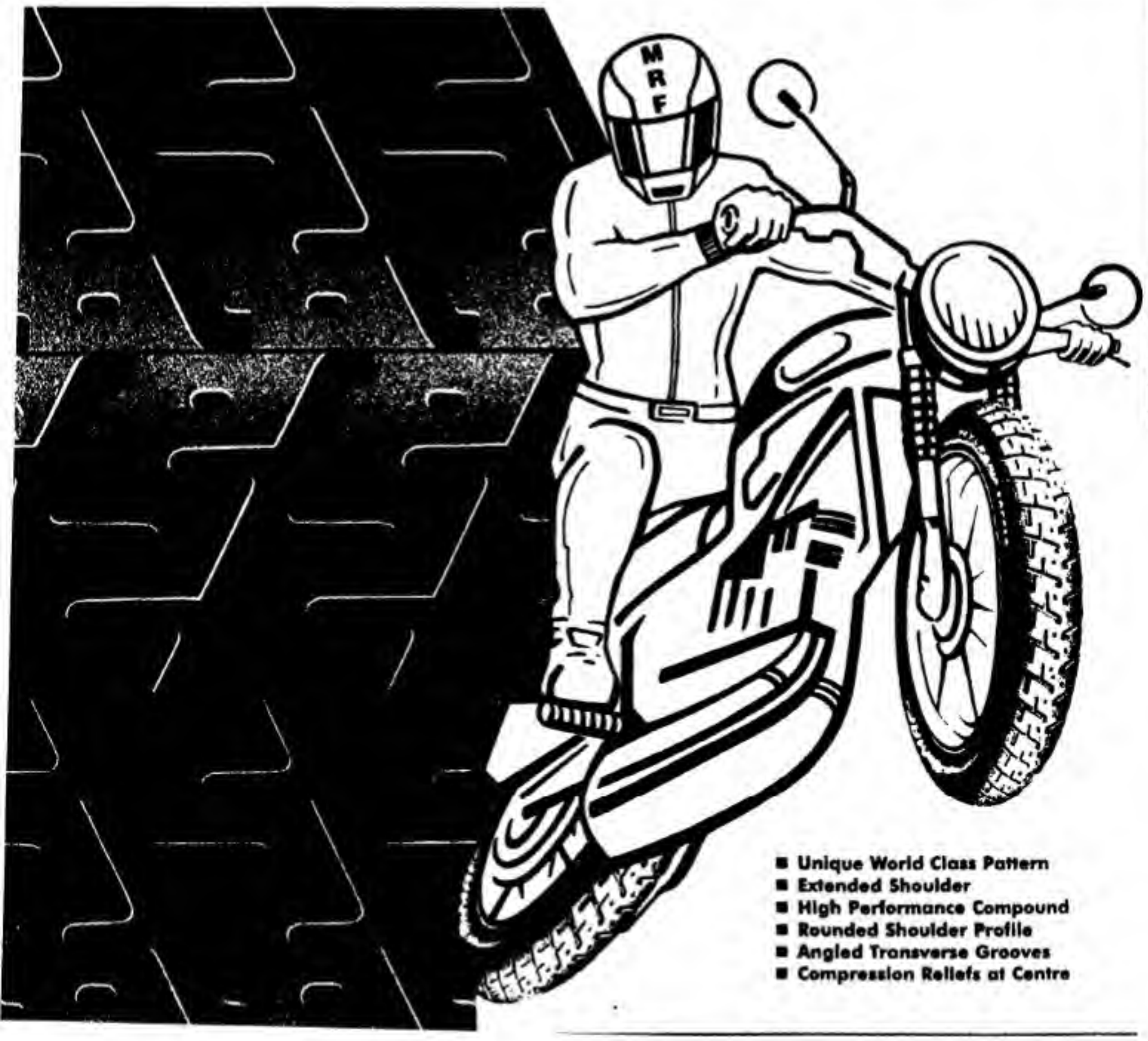

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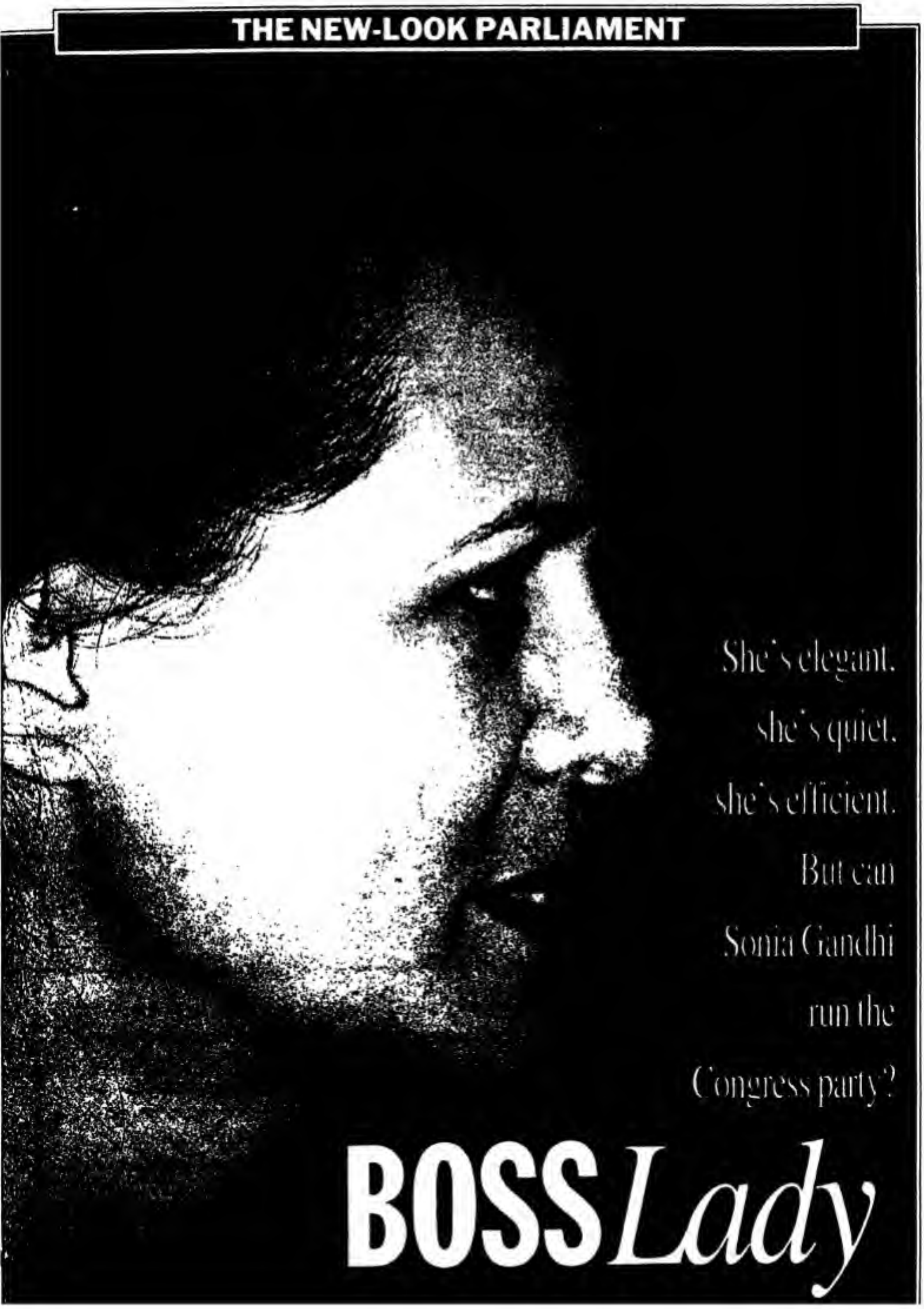

She's elegant,
she's quiet,
she's efficient.
But can
Sonia Gandhi
run the
Congress party?

BOSS *Lady*

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Boss lady

She's elegant, she's quiet, she's efficient. But can Sonia Gandhi run the Congress party?

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The twelfth Lok Sabha

Vinod Khanna has got the looks, Naveen Patnaik the manners and the two Yadavs have got each other. This is what the new Lok Sabha is all about

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Value addition

A Hyderabad journalist puts together a stunning display of art from day-to-day objects

Cover transparency: Jitender Gupta

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Editor: Vir Sanghvi

Balancing act

Your cover story *The public and the private face of the BJP* (29 March — 4 April) has rightly pointed out that 'despite speed-breakers, the BJP-led coalition is well on the road to governing India'. Fed up with frequent elections, the people now look forward to a stable government that will last its full five-year term. And they want the BJP to ensure peace and harmony in the country.

The task is doubtlessly uphill for Vajpayee. And especially when he is leading a 17-party coalition with each party having its separate ideology. But Vajpayee is serious about his job. His party's manifesto is being put on the back burner. And that the new government means business is clear from Vajpayee's statement that his government would work on the basis of the 'national agenda'.

Bhupen Bose, Calcutta (West Bengal)

■Now that the Vajpayee government has won the trust vote, the 17-party coalition government is all set to rule at the Centre. But though Jayalalitha finally sent the crucial 'letter of support' to the President, no one is sure for how long she will side with the BJP.

Jayalalitha will keep the BJP on tenterhooks as she would keep pressurising the BJP government in dislodging the Karunanidhi government. So stability of the government depends on how Vajpayee succeeds in the balancing act.

Priyaranjan Dasgupta, Calcutta (West Bengal)

Lesson for Husain

Husain's painting of Hanuman carrying nude Sita has caused lot of distress to the Hindus. (*Husain now*, 8 — 14 March). To a devout Hindu, Sita is a symbol of chastity, purity and patience. And she is regarded as mother too.

Hindus can hardly be blamed for the violent reaction to the painting. Affronting religious sentiments have become a favourite pastime with Husain. Earlier, he had painted goddess Saraswati in the nude. However justified Husain might feel as an artist to choose his subject, he has no right to hurt the religious sentiments.

N.K. Puri, New Delhi

Vajpayee: serious about his job

Neglected army

Major-general Ashok K. Mehta in his defence column headlined *Cry in the wilderness* (8 — 14 March) has rightly stressed the need for the President's intervention to set things right in the Indian Army. The jawans and officers of the army get a pittance though they are defending the country against heavy odds.

The government should see to it that there isn't any disgruntlement among army ranks. The warning of the army top brass that a decisive victory in the 'next war' cannot be assured should surely make the government sit up.

Agni should be developed as a strategic missile and inducted into the Army. Also, India should go nuclear to thwart any Pakistani and Chinese designs.

L. Rohini, Tiruchy (Tamil Nadu)

Defective radar

Your cover story *Return to the dynasty* (22 — 28 March) has exposed the chaos in the Congress. It's unfortunate that the country's oldest political party is now like a ship with a defective radar, so much so that it has had to import an Italian make to keep it moving.

A new equation has emerged from the recent elections: Congress minus Sonia is equal to zero.

Shankar Dewan, Siliguri (West Bengal)

■The growing discontent in the Congress stems largely from the fact that Sonia Gandhi lacks a mass base and that she is employing manipulative tactics to remain at the helm of affairs. An added irritant is the sycophantic role of Arjun Singh and N.D. Tewari. Singh's promotion has badly upset many leaders. Particularly offended is Madhavrao Scindia.

Sonia Gandhi: difficult task on hand

Sharad Pawar, who can legitimately claim credit for good electoral showing of the Congress in Maharashtra, is also unhappy with Sonia's way of functioning. Obviously, Sonia will have a tough time in assuaging the feelings of many senior leaders.

V. Segar, Delhi

■The Congress seems to have been hit by the mad rush for globalisation. No wonder this 112-year-old

party is being aided by foreign investment in the form of its new president. Surrounded by servile sycophants, Sonia Gandhi should guard against driving the last nail in the Congress' coffin.

Bedashruti Mitra, Raigarh (Madhya Pradesh)

Mosque and dargah

This refers to the story *Hijacking the gods* (22 — 28 March). The use of the term 'Muslim *dargah* to the particular shrine is questionable. A certain Syed Mustafa Hussain has been quoted as saying "our gods have been hijacked by these people." There is no concept of 'Gods' in Islam. The primary tenet of Islam is accepting the belief of *la ilaha illal lah* — there is no god, but Allah. A *dargah* is a shrine where people go to pay their respects to a saint and not worship him. So calling the shrine a Muslim *dargah* is inappropriate.

In the 16th century, India witnessed a multitude of sects and orders. They did not identify themselves with any particular religion and sought to amalgamate the dogmas of all faiths. Imam Shah was one such saint who was neither a Hindu nor a Muslim but simply a *Satyapanthi*. Calling his shrine a Muslim *dargah* and projecting it as being desecrated would lead to a volatile situation. Comparing the *dargah* with a mosque (Babri Masjid) is not justified as a mosque is a place for offering *namaz* while a *dargah* is merely a shrine of a saint.

Mohammad Shayin, Jaipur (Rajasthan)

Wrong on rights

I read V. Gangadhar's column headlined *Crusade without a cause* (8 — 15 March) with great interest. I agree with Gangadhar's view that the hypocrisy of the owners of Bennett, Coleman & Co. and their selfish motives are very clear in their so called matters relating to human rights. Where was their concern when Rajan Pillai was "killed?"

The Times of India (TOI) was oblivious to the arrests and treatment of Harshad Mehta. After over five years, the CBI and other agencies are yet to prosecute these people. *TOI* was in the forefront in media trials.

I have known people interrogated by the enforcement directorate (ED). They do not have any horror stories to tell. If the ED finds that the person is cooperative, they hardly resort to physical assaults.

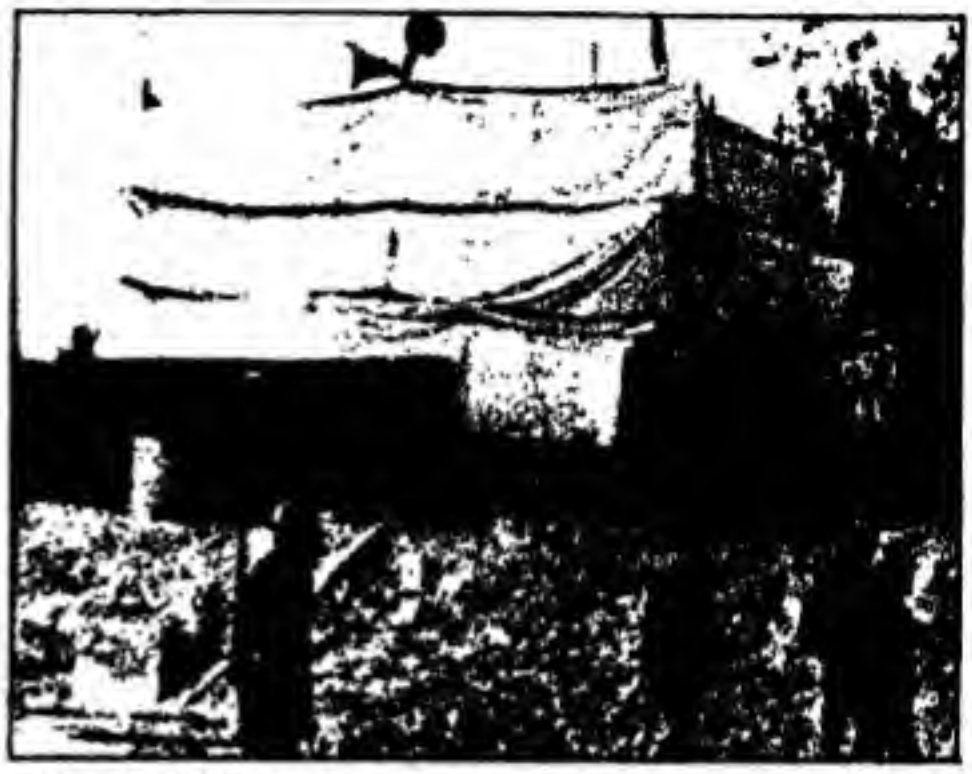
G. Karthikeyan, Pune (Maharashtra)

Beware, BJP

Any solution to the Ayodhya issue should be modelled on the lines of the Somnath temple, which was reconstructed.(*A settlement in sight?* 15 — 21 March). Instances abound in Indian history where temples have been converted into mosques. And now the Hindus are asking for the restoration of a most sacred site believed to be the birthplace of Shri Ram.

Why can't well-meaning Muslims consider the Imam of Khabha's suggestion that if a temple originally stood at the site, then it should be restored to the Hindus. Hundreds of people have suffered at Ayodhya for the *mandir* issue over the last one decade. Should all these sacrifices be allowed to go in vain now by building a temple, a masjid and a national monument at the birthplace of Shri Ram? BJP shouldn't take the Hindus and the Hindu society for granted.

N. Prasad, New Delhi



The makeshift temple at Ayodhya: stormy issue

Picture piracy

In the story *Politics of crime* (8 — 14 February), the picture of Syed Sahabuddin has been credited to Umesh Prasad. Another national magazine carried the same photograph and credited it to Deepak Kumar. But the fact is that the photograph was shot by me, and *Maya* carried the same photograph in the second issue of December 1993. The colour negative of this photo is with me. I had shot it in the presence of a staff reporter of *Maya*.

Bhaskar Mukherjee, Patna (Bihar)

Role reversal

Poor Sharad Pawar! His hopes for the top job have been dashed again. The posters outside the Congress party office proclaiming '*pratham sthaan*' failed to work. (*Sacrificing both Pawar and Power*, 8 — 14 March).

Surprisingly, the Maratha strongman is genuflecting before Sonia to convince her of his loyalty. Maybe, it suits him now but we haven't forgotten the same man when he rebelled — Pawar had accused the Gandhi family of monopolising the right to rule the country.

Amarnath Kamat, Bombay (Maharashtra)

Contributed by Sanjiv Kumar, Bhagalpur (Bihar)

MILESTONES

GRANTED: anticipatory bail, to former UP chief minister Mayawati, on 1 April, by Delhi High Court. The CBI had registered an FIR against her in a criminal case.

DISMISSED: by a designated Delhi court, on 1 April, a CBI petition seeking admission of statements of three foreign witnesses in the Lalchubhai Pathak cheating case.

APPOINTED: Pramod Mahajan, BJP general secretary, as political

adviser to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, on 2 April. He will enjoy the rank of a Cabinet minister.

RESIGNED: S.D. Muni, Indian ambassador to Laos, on 31 March, after Prime Minister Vajpayee's ministry lost decorum demanded political appointees to resign on their own.

ANNOUNCED: by Union home minister L.K. Advani, on 2 April, that central government will issue multipurpose identity cards for all citizens of India.

ELECTED: BJP nominee C.D. Thakur as Lok Sabha speaker from the Himachal Pradesh Congress candidate. He succeeds Balram Jakhar.

SIGHT & SOUND

KESHAV/THE HINDU

■ It is time for the rest of the country to come forward and convince the people of north-east that we genuinely care for them.

GEORGE FERNANDES, *defence minister, while on tour of the north-east*

■ There is no question of Mr Vajpayee's not leading us. We will ensure that he continues to guide the country even after the next election.

L.K. ADVANI, *senior BJP leader and Union home minister, after the Prime Minister announced in the House that he will not contest the next election*

■ The Prime Minister's speech in Lok Sabha is an indication that he is under constant pressure. First, he wanted to make Mr Jaswant Singh the finance minister and then he wanted to keep the portfolio with himself. But he was not allowed to do so.

V.N. GADGIL, *Congress spokesman*

■ Our government will not misuse Article 356. Central intervention will be resorted to only in exceptional cases of external aggression or internal rebellion.

ATAL BEHARI VAJPAYEE, *Prime Minister, denying that the Centre was planning to dismiss the DMK government in Tamil Nadu*

■ We will not allow BJP's manifesto to replace the national agenda.

SHARAD PAWAR, *senior Congress leader*

■ Who's to decide how much sex a woman needs and with whom, while a man can just sow his wild oats?

MANISHA KOIRALA, *film actress*

SEEN

TIPPLERS' DAY OUT

Haryana on the day prohibition was lifted

SHARING THE JOY: *an occasion too tempting to resist*

It was the best midnight hour in our lives. On 1 April, liquor flowed in Haryana with a vengeance after 21 months of prohibition.

Armed with beer bottles and rum, we hit the Delhi-Haryana border. Crossing the boundary had never been so tempting, especially since the day prohibition was lifted in the Jatland was a dry day in Delhi. All the more reason to clink the glasses.

A young teenager winked at us while taking a sip, "*Aaj to double peene ka din hai — do bottle kam se kam* (Today is the day to have two bottles at least)." Cheers to that.

Expectedly, business was brisk. 'Mastana' (an aptly named liquor shop) sold Rs 25,000 worth of beer on the day the licence to drink was given. The scene was the same elsewhere.

In expectation of good business, the liquor vendors who had been issued licences, were 'dressed' for the occasion — like a bride waiting for her *barat* to arrive. Freshly painted signboards, gleaming counters, bottles lined on the shelves. "*Aaj to bottle dekhke hi chad gayi* (I am tipsy merely at the sight of these bottles)," said a wine shop owner.

And tipsy was the scene all around. Inhibitions thrown to the winds, limits forgotten — the idea was to have fun, straight from the bottle.

Alcohol can be a great bridge — it knows no age or class. As others joined the revelry, we made new friends. Those who had never held a glass in their hands, found the occasion too tempting to resist. Like 17-year-old Satyapal who chose this day to sing ode to Bacchus. And those accustomed to buying *desi* had switched over to *angrezi* for the day.

But some had to walk away in disappointment. Supplies could not reach all the 1,500-odd *thekas* in time. Some private hotels had to wait till the next evening for stocks to arrive. Few liquor contractors could be spotted in queues outside the state excise offices and distilleries to complete the formalities.

Not just wine shops — even outlets selling its accompaniments like cigarettes, snacks, soft drinks and even mineral water never had it so good.

But not all drank out of joy. Some cops and liquor smugglers for instance. Said Dharam Pal, "*Dukhme pee raha hoon main. Kya karoonga main*?" (I am drinking out of sorrow. What will I do now for a living)?

It was a question of living which led the Haryana government to lift the ban. The state was poorer by Rs 1,200 crore.

But for us it was a hangover we never got over. It isn't every day that you get to 'drink on the rocks' of the Haryana Aravallis. •

Pallavi Ghosh/Gurgaon

Inhibitions thrown to the winds, limits forgotten — the idea was to have fun, straight from the bottle

The second half

The insider's guide to Narasimha Rao's The Insider

Why should a former chief minister bother to write a novel? Well, the answer to that is another question: what does a chief minister who has just been ousted from office do with all the time on his hands?

Behind those two questions lies the story of *The Insider*, P.V. Narasimha Rao's first novel, much hyped by publishers Penguin as a *roman-a-clef* as a precedent shattering insider's look at politics by former Prime Minister.

The truth is that Narasimha Rao began the book mainly because he had too much time on his hands. He was chief minister of Andhra Pradesh for less than two years, came to New Delhi and tried to find a place in the national Congress organisation. Fortunately for him, because Mrs Gandhi liked him, he got to become AICC general secretary. Unfortunately for him, this period coincided with the Emergency which he thoroughly disapproved of.

He spent his time during the Emergency era talking about the 20-point programme and searching for a means of self-expression only to find that he had even more time because Indira Gandhi lost the 1977 election and the Congress went into Opposition.

He decided that something needed to be said about the role of chief ministers in the post-Jawaharlal Nehru era and wrote a paper on this subject which he read out at a seminar at the London School of Oriental and African Studies. Despite being a fine piece of work — elegantly written and cogently argued — this never got the reception it deserved.

So, says Narasimha Rao now, "I decided that some of these same ideas could be better expressed in a novel. I felt people would relate better to these experiences in the form of fiction."

Accordingly he began work on the manuscript of *The Other Half*, a novel about a Congress worker called Niranjan who rises to be the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh. Being Narasimha Rao, he wrote it in a style where the narrative was frequently interrupted for long dissertations on contemporary Indian history. For instance, Niranjan had only to hear that the Chinese had attacked India for the book to go into a 25-page account of the 1962 debacle, before returning to Niranjan's more mundane Andhraite preoccupations.

When much of the manuscript was ready — the story had reached the stage where Niranjan became chief minister — he sent out copies to various friends among them Nikhil Chakravartty, editor of *Mainstream*, to which Rao was a frequent but anonymous contributor. Chakravartty suggested that a copy be sent to his friend Mrinalini Sarabhai, whose daughter Mallika ran a book publishing company called Mapin.

When Rao lost the prime ministership and had plenty of time to revise the book, Lyn Franklin approached Penguin's David Davidar and it was decided that Viking would publish the first hardback edition

It was through the Sarabhais that Rao was put in touch with New York literary agent Lyn Franklin, whose roster was later to include such luminaries as Bishop Tutu. Franklin told Rao that the book had potential and urged him to finish it. At that stage, the author wanted to end it with Niranjan's downfall as chief minister.

That is where matters remained for several years. Much to Rao's surprise — and to the astonishment of his colleagues — he rose from one position of influence to another, ending up as Prime Minister almost by accident.

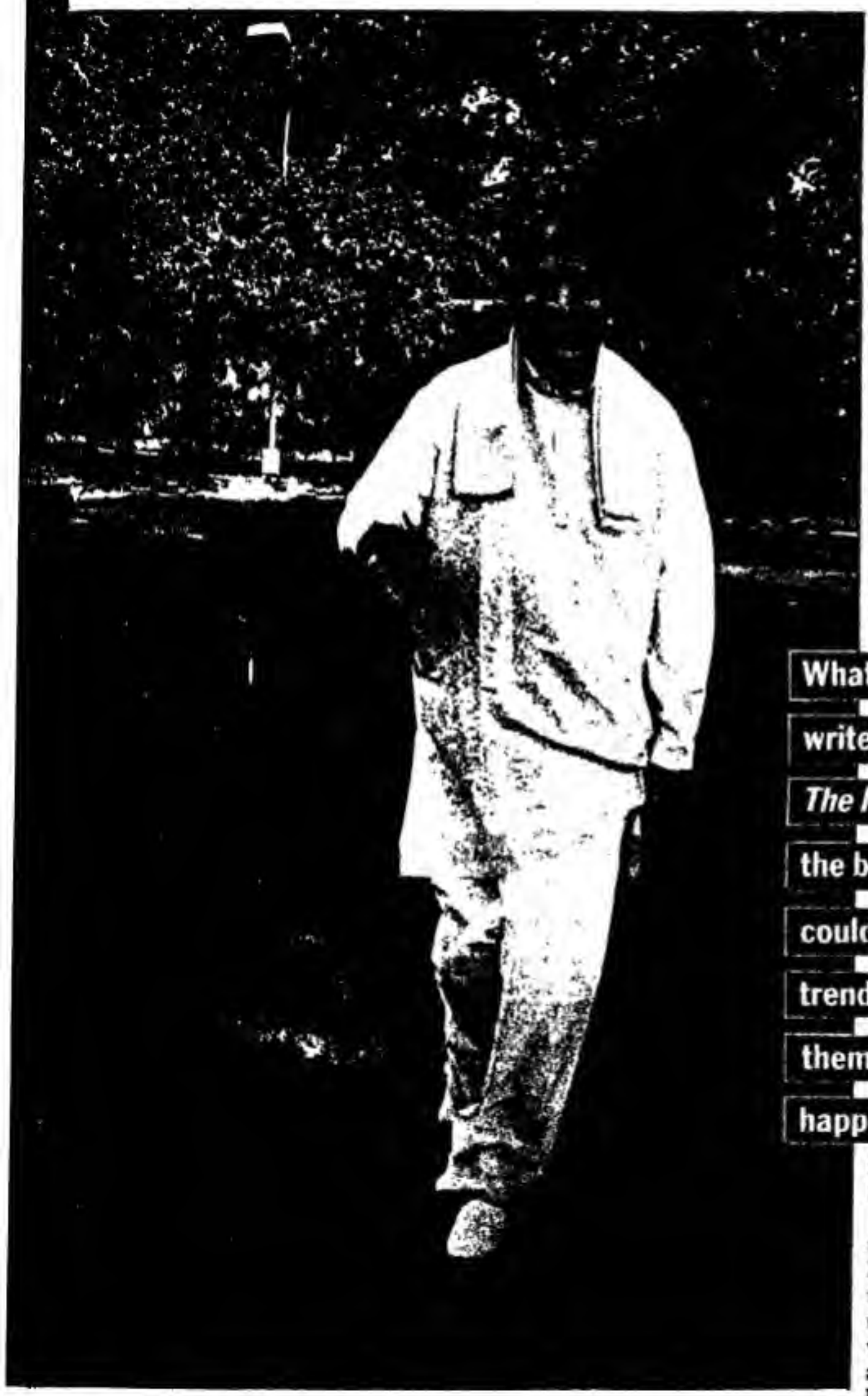
He had intended to update and finish *The Other Half* in 1991, when he took a conscious decision to retire from active politics and move to Hyderabad. But when destiny intervened and shifted him to Race Course Road instead, the new Prime Minister decided that the book would have to wait. He told Franklin, who was keen to publish what she had, that he would not like any novels published while he was still Prime Minister.

But then, Rao lost the initiative.

Nikhil Chakravartty had retained a copy of the manuscript and he gave it to *Outlook* magazine which had a massive scoop for its launch issue. Unfortunately for Rao, *Outlook* focused on the subject of obvious interest: the many slightly naughty bits dealing with 'fornication' and the like.

Franklin was outraged (in an interview to SUNDAY at the time she complained about breach of copyright) and Rao was despondent that what was intended to be a noble effort to examine the role of politics in modern India had been received as the breathless scribblings of a septuagenarian pornographer.

It was clear that *The Other Half* would have to be published sooner rather than later. Fate appeared to agree.



In no time at all Rao lost the prime ministership and had plenty of time to revise the book. Franklin approached Penguin's David Davidar and it was decided that Viking would publish the first hardback edition.

Penguin's editors got to work and many changes were imposed on the manuscript by all sides. Out went all the naughty bits ("I was concerned that people would read only those parts," explains Rao), the central character became Anand rather than Niranjan and Rao's old friend, *The Hindustan Times*' political editor Kalyani Shanker is thanked in the acknowledgements for having thought of the new title.

That is the genesis of *The Insider*.

Despite all the revisions, the book has not been updated significantly. It still ends with the central character as chief minister and everybody — the publishers, the agent and the author himself — concedes that a sequel is in the works. As Rao says, "I have him into the chief minister's chair, now I have to get him out."

As planned, the sequel will cover Anand's time as general secretary (it will be fun to see how he gets around his opposition to the Emergency), his rise to foreign minister (a triumph by most standards), and his stint as home minister (which had decidedly mixed reviews). As of now, Narasimha Rao does not intend to write about his prime ministership — at least, not as part of fiction.

But he does wish to set the record straight in one or two areas. He is presently working on a monograph on Ayodhya. He is not sure whether it will be a long article, a pamphlet or even, a book.

Whatever it is that Rao chooses to write next, it will be worth reading i *The Insider* is any guide. Not only is the book readable but it marks wha could be the beginning of a new trend in which the players themselves record history as it happened

(Cynics have already suggested a title: Babri Masjid — My part in its downfall).

Though the official position is that the sequel to *The Insider* will come next, Rao's personal staff say that he is much more obsessed with Ayodhya, and that until he has finished that manuscript, he won't go back to *The Insider* sequel. In any case, he hasn't written much of it. He has only updated the story to 1974 from 1973.

Nevertheless whatever it is that Rao chooses to write next, it will be worth reading if *The Insider* is any guide. Not only is the book readable but it marks what could be the beginning of a new trend in which the players themselves record history as it happened. •

Vir Sanghvi/New Delhi

RAJIV SHUKLA

Beyond swadeshi

Investors in India and abroad are satisfied with Yashwant Sinha as FM

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has shown in the very beginning that he is not favourably disposed towards the idea of *swadeshi*. By not extending the finance ministry to Murli Manohar Joshi in a clear indication of his preference about Indian economy he thought it fit to bring a former IAS officer and pragmatic politician Yashwant Sinha as finance minister. Not only finance, in all other economic ministries and core sectors he has brought ministers who do not believe in the *swadeshi* concept of economy and rather, hate it.

The list goes like this. Commerce has been given to Ramakrishna Hegde, communications to Buta Singh, power to Rangarajan Kumaramangalam, steel and mines to Naveen Patnaik, coal to Dilip Ray (industrialist), industrial development to Sukhbir Singh Badal, revenue, banking and insurance to R.K. Kumar (chartered accountant) and petroleum to V.K. Ramamurthy. Most of them are either former Congressmen or young politicians educated abroad. None of them toes the *swadeshi* line.

Besides them, the Planning Commission has gone to another *swadeshi*-hater —Jaswant Singh— and the Prime Minister's Office will be looked after by Pramod Mahajan, a most liberal politician. In the PMO too, principal secretary Brijesh Mishra is from the foreign service. He is the son of former Congress leader D.P. Mishra, who had installed Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister. Key areas like chemicals, fertiliser and agriculture have also gone to non-*swadeshi* ministers like Surjit Singh Barnala and Sompal Shastry.

Sinha's selection as finance minister was initially not liked by many, but gradually he made his impact by maintaining a low profile. His understanding of the economy is no less compared to any professional economist. If he continues as finance minister for six months it would be difficult for Vajpayee to find an alternative.

Sinha is opposed to the idea of giving substantial reliefs to the people as it would adversely affect the economy. However, he wants to present a memorable Budget incorporating the BJP ideology

Sinha is opposed to the idea of giving substantial reliefs to the people as it would adversely affect the economic scenario. However, he wants to present a memorable Budget incorporating the BJP ideology.

Sinha is in favour of providing more facilities to foreign investors. His forthcoming US visit will add more inputs to Budget preparation. It will be presented either in the last week of May or in the first week of June. Sources confirm that Sinha is in favour of retaining the set-up in the finance ministry, at least till the Budget. He wants all three secretaries, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, N.K. Singh and C. Ramachandran to continue. He also wants to retain Chidambaram's private secretary, Krishna Saini.

But the hard-core *swadeshi* lobby in the BJP wants Ahluwalia to be replaced. It also wants to accept N.K. Singh as finance secretary because of his proximity to Vajpayee and Jaswant Singh. On the other hand, Sinha considers Ahluwalia to be of great help in improving the economic scenario.

Sinha's appointment is being received well in all sections of the economic world as he has taken a balanced posture. Contrary to fears, American businessmen and diplomats have hailed his announcements and Indian industry has also expressed satisfaction.

However, it is amazing that Sensex has gone up within two weeks of Sinha's appointment and for the first time in six months it has touched the 4,000 mark. The perception that Sinha will prove to be inferior to Jaswant Singh or P. Chidambaram turns out to be a myth. It seems that in the given economic scenario he will not be going for a populist Budget and will not be giving more reliefs in the income-tax rates and excise duties. •

Paradise lost

Victims of ethnic violence in Manipur try to put their lives together again

On the face of it, it is an idyllic, if isolated, village on the far-flung slopes of Manipur. A closer look reveals many warts.

A heavily guarded gate is the only entry point into the Leishipung centre in Chandel district. It is the single break in a barricade of forbiddingly tall fences, barbed with bamboo spikes. This centre was set up last year by a local NGO, Manipur Farmers Tribal Development Association, to rehabilitate victims of ethnic clashes in the state. Today, it houses 50 women along with their families, or what's left of them.

"We chose this spot because it is relatively safe—there is an army camp barely four kilometres away," says Shimray, the project director. The displaced women have been trained in alternative income avenues via a loin-loom weaving project. Between cups of milkless tea, they show us samples of intricately woven Naga shawls.

Most of these women are widows. They have lost everything to the ongoing Naga-Kuki clashes. Though they now have a means of livelihood, for them peace is still far away. Even here, 20 km away from the most basic of grocer's stores, they are not completely safe. The centre has been attacked by Kuki militants twice. And though the Naga women reassure us that there is no danger now, the freshly dug deep combat trenches contradict them.

After Leishipung, there is a feeling of deja vu as we move from one village to another. Hardly any home is untouched by ethnic or extremist violence. Or by the fear of it. Bela Rani, a soft-spoken educated woman in her early 30s, says she still doesn't know who killed her husband three years ago. Or why. "Extremists, I think. I have no time to feel angry or sad. I have my children to bring up." Bela remembers with pride that her husband was a social worker and an "assistant manager". Though things are hard today, her children are bright and she dreams of a promising future for them.

Brajeshwari, who lost her husband to a bomb blast in Imphal two years ago, is looking desperately for a job. She has two school-going kids, aged eight and

Traumatised children: do they have a future?

Jayalakshmi: hoping against hope

ten. "Thankfully, the children have got over the trauma now. But I miss him." Twenty-year-old Withuibou has a similar preoccupation with finding a better job. He became the sole guardian of a large family when his father and uncle were killed in Naga-Kuki clashes in 1994. "I had just finished my matriculation then. With two families to support, I had no choice but to stop studying," he remembers.

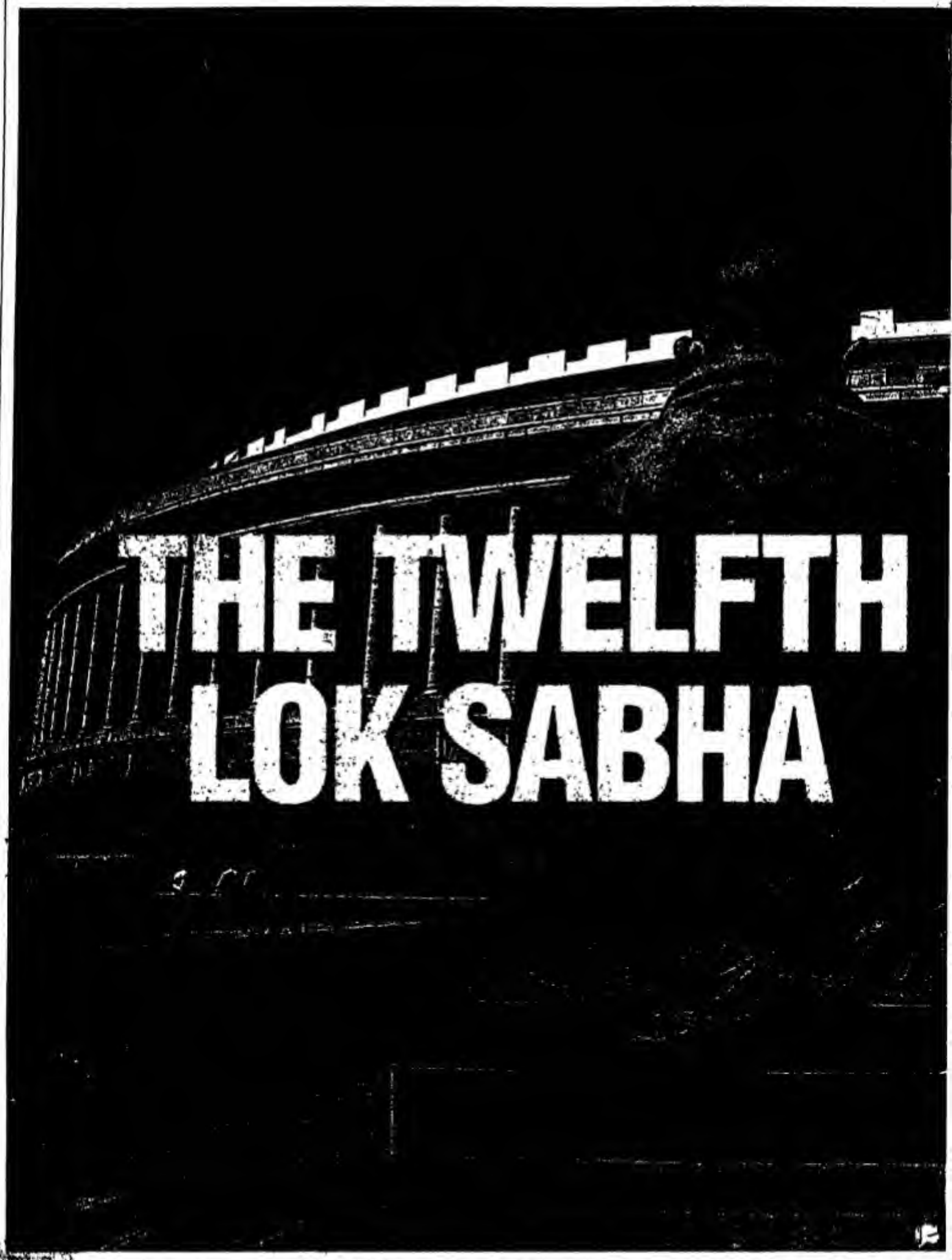
In the absence of government funding, the community feeling is strong and deep here. Kaphung Kui, the village headman in Leishipung, has donated 20 hectares of land to the rehabilitation project. The Imphal-based Khwai Social Development Organisation (virtually a single-family workforce), in collaboration with the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, is also running a project for training young women affected by ethnic violence in machine embroidery.

Rajkumari Diana of Khwai introduces us proudly to the "smartest" girl in her brood, Jayalakshmi. The 18-year-old girl's father was killed in 1986 by extremists. Though she is being trained in embroidery, she wants to be a chartered accountant. "Come what may, I will not let this girl give up her studies," says Diana.

On our way back, we pass Churachandpur, the worst-affected area. More than 3,000 houses have been burnt here. We head towards Imphal. After being stopped a number of times by army patrols, we reach the Manipur Tourism Development Corporation hotel—which is in complete darkness for the third day in a row.

It could have easily been India's star tourist location. As it is, Manipur seems to be yet another paradise lost. •

Chitralekha Dhamija/Leishipung and Imphal


THE TWELFTH
LOK SABHA

V. RAJAGOPAL

V. RAJAGOPAL

Omak Apang being sworn-in by President K.R. Narayanan

Vinod Khanna has got the looks, Naveen Patnaik the manners and the two Yadavs have got each other. This is what the new Lok Sabha is all about

The more the voters ask for a change, the more the Lok Sabha remains the same. The 11th Lok Sabha was dissolved because the people of India wanted an able and stable government. And look what happened? The ensuing polls threw up an even more unstable mandate. In fact, as P. Chidambaram summed it: "Never before has the Parliament been split right down the middle."

Or to use Pramod Mahajan's more graphic description, "the situation is so bad, that if we want a Bill passed, not a single MP can afford to be absent even for a second; even if he has to go to answer nature's call".

Despite the 288 new faces in the Lower House, things haven't *really* changed. If anything they've become worse. For one, with regional warlords Mayawati and Laloo Prasad Yadav in the national arena, expect to see a lot of UP and Bihar politics being fought in the classic UP Assembly style. In fact, Pappu Yadav of the '*main tere dant tor kar hath mein rakh doonga*' fame will be sorely missed. But if things become particularly dull, then there is the very vocal wrestler Virendra Singh (who defeated Phoolan Devi from Mirzapur) in the BJP *akhada*.

And to look particularly pained at such un-drawing room like acts, the voters of Aska have returned Naveen Patnaik of the New York cocktail circuit fame to the House.

Here's a quick guide to why Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is not looking particularly happy with the mandate he has to contend with:

V RAJAGOPAL

OMAR ABDULLAH

The Apang Tapangs

That is what the Samajwadi Party general secretary, Amar Singh, affectionately calls the brat pack. There are four sons of present chief ministers in this Lok Sabha. The youngest of the lot is the 27-year-old Omak Apang from Arunachal Pradesh. The graduate from Delhi University's Hindu College is already fed up of the media blitzkrieg he has to contend with. It doesn't help that he is also the youngest (minister of state for tourism) in Vajpayee's Cabinet.

With an MBA degree and a love for football, how is he going to hold down his new job? That doesn't seem to faze Apang as much as the fact he won't have all that free time on his hands for his college friends who call for him regularly at Arunachal Bhavan — only to find out that he's too busy to come out and play.

Those who were with him at Delhi's Modern School, remember him as someone who liked to party a lot. "What's wrong with that?" asks the Congress MP, Kamal Nath. "It's only natural."

But this is Dad's party and Omak is on his best behaviour. He talks serious stuff of promoting tourism in the north-east, of providing stability in the

V RAJAGOPAL

NAVEEN PATNAIK

country, and even of switching from his blazer and trousers to *khadi*. He can't do more.

But Omar Abdullah, the 28-year-old son of the Jammu and Kashmir chief minister, has done more. Not only has he already made his maiden speech in the Lok Sabha; but during the debate in Parliament, he shocked the visitors' gallery by jumping on his feet and objecting when the Congress MP from J&K, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, launched an attack on the state government. No one recalls just what he said, but everyone remembers the red-faced Abdullah who sat down afterwards.

Was Dad watching TV just then?

"It's a part of my life," said the J&K chief minister's son, the 28-year-old Omar Abdullah when asked about the perks of being a *bade baap ka beta*. "He is my father, and his father is my grandfather. Nothing can change that."

He also acknowledges with a laugh, that his gift of the gab is not thanks to the marketing job which he chucked up to join politics, but instead something 'that's in my blood'.

Though most of the faces in the Central Hall are family friends, Omak and

There are four sons of present chief ministers in this Lok Sabha. And Amar Singh, the Samajwadi Party general secretary, affectionately calls the brat pack 'Apang Tapangs'

Omar do tend to have the occasional cup of coffee together. If nothing else, the media has thrown them together.

As for the Haryana chief minister's son, the 52-year-old Surendra Singh has seen it all before. He may be his father's favourite son, but that didn't stop him from distancing himself from Bansi Lal's disastrous prohibition measures.

Another old timer — so claimed because this is his second term — is the Akali Dal chief minister's 36-year-old son, Sukhbir Singh Badal. The MBA from California now holds the industry portfolio in the BJP government. "I would like to congratulate the Prime Minister for encouraging the younger generation in his Cabinet," he says effusively. Why doesn't he just congratulate his dad instead?

Although, Sukhbir is yet to make an impression in Parliament — "First you complain about the din and then you ask

me why I don't speak there?" he complained. Adding, "Its good to give other people a chance...I don't want to be like them."

So keen is he to be different from the rest that he has been telling friends that he would like to turn his constituency, Faridkot, into another Singapore.

California dreaming? Maybe not, with 'Daddy's' blessings and the BJP's industry portfolio, these things can happen.

The Teachers And The Backbenchers

She taught English in Manipur before she took to politics, which is why Kim Gangte could be forgiven for finding Parliament not unlike the unruly classroom in the *Mind Your Language* series. Says the no-nonsense 34-year-old, "In Parliament some people believe in shouting, but I believe in reasoning. I don't want to criticise anyone who is shouting, but I prefer to reason."

Unfortunately that's not quite how backbenchers like Laloo Prasad Yadav, Akbar (Dumpy) Ahmed, Sanjay Singh and others see it. But still, Gangte tried her best. Before launching into her speech, the CPI member implored the other 'Honourable Members' not to shout her down. And no one dared. Once a school teacher...

"My students were always very quiet when I taught the class," she recalls. "But at the same time, no one went off to sleep," she added hastily.

"In Parliament some people believe in shouting, but I believe in reasoning," says Kim Gangte, MP from Manipur

Politics was not part of the timetable Kim had set out for herself. But once she got involved in social work — especially empowerment of women — she realised that it was all very well to give lectures to the village women on their rights; but nothing could be achieved without help from the Centre. "Things are really bad there," she said. "Most women did not even know that they can fight for their rights. "In fact," she recalls with a smile, "the men used to joke that when Kim Gangte comes and speaks, we are too scared to go home. Our wives might ask us to wash the dishes."

So those MPs who intend to oppose the Bill on 33 per cent reservation should think again. Otherwise, things might get a bit uncomfortable back home.

While Kim is preoccupied with the insurgency in her state, the poor Speaker of the House has his own band of mischief-makers to contend with.

The presence of regional chieftains such as Laloo Yadav, Mulayam Singh Yadav and Mayawati will make it a trifle difficult for the proceedings of the House to go beyond North Indian politics. But the BJP need not worry. For every barb of Mulayam Singh and every rustic witticism by Laloo Yadav, there is a Sanjay Singh, Veerendra Singh and the newly-acquired Mamata Banerjee.

Ironically, it was Mulayam who first started talking about criminals in politics. Pointing to the BJP in the last session, he had said that all the corrupt elements had gone to that side. "*Kya yeh Ganga hai, ke pavitra ho jayenge*?" he scoffed. An unfazed BJP retaliated by making welcoming gestures to the Opposition benches, and screamed 'come-come'. At that time, with the vote of confidence hanging over their heads, the

Sukhbir Badal during the swearing-in ceremony

MAYAWATI

LALOO PRASAD YADAV

Madan Lal Khurana side of the treasury bench looked as if the offer was in dead earnest.

However, when Mulayam began to accuse the BJP and its allies of inducting criminals in politics, it got a bit much for the other side. Immediately, Veerendra Singh was on his feet, rolling his sleeves and asking Mulayam about the Samajwadi Party's candidate from Azamgarh, Ramakant Pande.

"*Aur Dumpy kahan hain*?" yelled Sanjay Singh with the air of one sitting in a college canteen. The MP from Azamgarh, Akbar Ahmed sitting next to his party boss, Mayawati, just glowered back. But not for long. The minute a BJP

The presence of regional chieftains such as Laloo Yadav, Mayawati and Mulayam Singh has made it a trifle difficult for the proceedings of the House to go beyond north Indian politics

MULAYAM SINGH YADAV

speaker stopped speaking, the 45-year-old Dumpy was on his feet shouting, 'Allah-ho-Akbar.'

With regional politics coming into the national arena in such strong numbers, it will be difficult for the Parliament to go about its normal business. "I'm told its never been like this," says Omar. Apart from the chaos in the mathematics, the number of parties has also doubled. Whereas the last Lok Sabha had as many as 28 political parties, this time the number has almost doubled with the tally going upto 42. As a result, even natural disasters such as the cyclone in Midnapore becomes politicised.

There is, however, a very earnest gentleman amongst the backbenchers. In fact, the old timers joke about Vinod Khanna's obsession to hear each and every speech that is going on. "He often leaves a conversation half-way when he realises that the speeches have begun," said a third term MP. "He's scared he'll miss something important," he added with a laugh.

To keep Khanna company, his wife Kavita can usually be spotted in the visitors' gallery. And fortunately, is also at hand to help him answer questions from the press. Otherwise, Khanna looks as if he'd rather offer reporters approaching him with a pen and pad autographs, than answer questions.

In fact, a BJP worker was heard telling his party leaders recently that they'

would have to go in for an orientation programme to educate Vinod Khanna on patents and such matters. "It's you who needs an orientation programme," retorted a senior BJP leader. "Asking Vinod Khanna about patents!"

Seat Sharing

One is not clear whether he is hiding from a senior BJP lady MP who insisted on pulling his chubby cheeks; but Omak Apang is usually found huddled with other MPs from the state or with Omar Abdullah.

But as regards the old timers, there are some surprising new alliances being formed right in the benches of the Lok Sabha itself. Such as the sight of the two Madhya Pradesh rivals Kamal Nath and Madhavrao Scindia sitting together — and even looking happy in the process. Looks like the BJP is not the only party with *mukhautas* (masks).

But the most surprising friendship is that of Mulayam Singh and Laloo Yadav. The very real prospect of a BJP in power has achieved what the erstwhile UF could not. There was a time when both considered each other as a potential candidate for prime ministership. With that out of the way, they are now the best of friends. Not only do they sit together, but they even laugh at each other's jokes — what more can a friend do?

VINOD KHANNA WITH HIS WIFE KAVITA

To keep Vinod Khanna company, his wife Kavita can usually be spotted in the visitors' gallery. She helps him to answer questions from the press. Otherwise, Khanna looks as if he'd rather offer autographs, than answer questions

Often seen sitting next to them is the architect of the new-found friendship — former PM Chandra Shekhar. With the decline of the UF, this could well be the beginning of a new anti-BJP front.

Mulayam has got himself another friend — his rival from UP, Mayawati. Though she is yet to laugh at his jokes, she does however refrain from attacking him. Even when the BJP brought up the UP guest house incident, the lady showed uncharacteristic restrain and did not rise to the bait.

It's not that *behenji* is friendless. Clad in supposedly designer *salwar-kameez*, she comes to Parliament flanked by her two loyalists, the BSP's Arif Mohammad Khan and the infamous Dumpy. Now she has even learnt to delegate, often prodding Arif to stand up and bring up the Babri Masjid demolition. This, however, has no effect on the BJP. "*Aur nayi kahani sunao* (Tell me something new)," said the BJP's newly acquired protector, Sanjay Singh with a cheeky grin.

This is the Parliament that governs us. These are the leaders the people of India voted for. They promised us good governance and stability.

Maybe when they've finished quibbling over the whereabouts of Subramanian Swamy and Jayalalitha's meeting with Jaswant Singh they'll get down to the serious business of legislation. •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

BOSS LADY

V RAJAGOPAL

She's elegant, she's quiet, she's efficient. But can Sonia Gandhi run the Congress party?

The veil is lifting slowly. The barriers are coming down and the distance between 10 Janpath and 24 Akbar Road is suddenly entirely bridgeable. And as party chief, Sonia Gandhi is doing a lot more than just smiling at visitors who drop in to see her at her residence at 10 Janpath. She is walking across to the party headquarters next door and summoning Congressmen of all shapes and sizes to meet her. And to answer some very hard-hitting questions.

She is no longer just a link with the party's glorious past. As party president, Sonia Gandhi is now the future of the Congress.

Eager party workers thronged the All India Congress Committee (AICC) session in Delhi's Siri Fort auditorium on 6 April, with just one thing on their mind: to meet their new party chief. Though the interaction was as restricted as it was in Calcutta at the party's plenary just eight months ago, this one was different. At that time, Sonia was just someone they stared at. When she spoke, it was as Rajiv Gandhi's widow. Tears came easily to Congress workers: her husband and mother-in-law were lost to assassins. It was all very soulful and sad. More so as she quoted liberally from the Life and Works of Rajiv Gandhi.

This time around, she still quoted her late husband. But her tone was sharper, her speeches more incisive. Congress workers noticed that she wasn't letting Rajiv Gandhi think for her. She was locating his beliefs in the present. In political terms, she had grown: she was now Rajiv Gandhi's successor.

Sitting on the dais, the Congress president was still as inaccessible to the average party worker as she was in Calcutta. But this time round, there was a very eloquent link of communication between her and the 1,500 AICC delegates assembled in Delhi's Siri Fort auditorium. Every Congressman had his eyes pinned on her, as she sat through the 12-hour-long session.

It was Natwar Singh who pointed out the fact that by being present through all the speeches, she had effectively ensured that the rest of the delegates also remained glued to their seats.

It was not just curiosity value. To Congressmen she embodied hope and a second chance at electoral politics. But can Sonia deliver the goods?

There are too many handicaps. For one, she was catapulted from a primary member to party chief. Her political experience is zilch: save the fact that she married into the country's oldest and

"She is just like Indira Gandhi. When she asks you a question, she makes sure that she knows what's on your mind without giving hers away"

V. RAJAGOPAL

most experienced political family.

Second, her security cover makes her inaccessible to the average Congressman. As a former Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao had a similar handicap. But it was not from Rao that Sonia took over, but the highly accessible Sitaram Kesri. "It's cruelly unfair to make comparison between the two presidents," said Sheila Dixit, a close family friend. "I he l something odd the other day. A Congressman complained that she (Sonia) was not available on the telephone...She has just begun (her career) and everyone wants to prejudge her style," she added.

But if her comments at the party's AICC session were anything to go by, then Sonia is aware of all this. Her concluding speech was all of ten minutes long: but it was an effective agenda of what the Congress under Sonia Gandhi will be like. Those looking to decipher her style, can take their cue from there.

No sycophants

"Sycophancy will have no place in the party," said the newly-elected party president. But even before she had left the AICC meeting, sycophants had swarmed around their respected leaders. Even a has-been party leader like V.C. Shukla

Sonia Gandhi is no longer just a link with the party's glorious past. As party president, she is now the future of the Congress

was told by a delegate that his speech was 'the best and the most hard-hitting'. "I only came to hear your speech," gushed a Shukla loyalist. Unfortunately, since most had slept through Shukla's speech, no one was in a position to contradict him.

Similarly, the National Students Union of India (NSUI) chief, Alka Lamba, was told that she sounded just like Priyanka Gandhi. Since Lamba's speech was filled with gory references of both her father's and grandmother's death, it is highly unlikely that Priyanka would have been able to sit through that speech, let alone deliver it.

But if Sonia Gandhi wants to discourage sycophants swarming around her, she'll get ample help from Sharad Pawar. As Congress Working Committee (CWC) members on the dais struggled to stand up everytime Sonia stepped on to the dais, a complacent Sharad Pawar waved them down. As far as he was concerned, once was enough. But in his zealousness to stay clear of sycophancy, Pawar should take care that he doesn't cross the line to indiscipline.

No coteries

When Sonia Gandhi took over, West Bengal chief minister Jyoti Basu called her the last hope of a faction-ridden Congress. Echoing this sentiment, Sonia attacked the coterie-culture by referring to the groupism within the party. "I believe nothing can shake the Congress if it remains united," she said.

Even as she spoke, she was flanked by leaders of the various groups. On one side of her sat Jitendra Prasada and Sharad Pawar. The wily Arjun Singh sulked in the last row. And barbs were exchanged in the various speeches on the dais itself.

The Sharad Pawar lobby criticised the political resolution merely because it was drafted by the Maratha's rival, Arjun Singh; party general-secretary Madhavrao Scindia had a dig at his rival from Madhya Pradesh, chief minister Digvijay Singh. Although he did not

attack Digvijay directly, Scindia made it a point to congratulate the Himachal Pradesh chief minister, Virbhadra Singh, for taking moral responsibility for the party's debacle in the state. The reference was, of course, to Digvijay who had passed the blame onto his ministers of state. And even Pranab Mukherjee's red cheeks looked sunburnt as Priya Ranjan Das Munshi blamed 'party infighting in West Bengal' for his own electoral defeat.

Sonia's actions in Siri Fort justified that she was not going to be manipulated by an Arjun Singh or a Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy. She was equally, if not warmer to Narasimha Rao than she was to those who went around claiming that they were 'close to 10 Janpath'. It was Sonia who insisted that Rao address the session and gave him the respect due to a former president. Which is more than Rao had ever done to her. She even smiled indulgently at Kesri's last-minute clowning around for the television cameras and graciously offered to share her seat with Kesri, when he returned from his post-lunch nap to find Rao sitting in his place. The message was clear: there was no one lobby close to 10 Janpath. All Congressmen were welcome.

"I think we are seeing the last of the coterie," pointed out Tom Vadakan of Newswatch, a voluntary group which monitors the day-to-day political happenings for the Congress. "The emphasis is on accountability, and there is a shift from personal agendas to a national agenda."

If she expected accountability from others, the Congress president made it clear that she would follow the same principles. One of her first decisions was to nominate two such candidates to the Rajya Sabha who had lost the Lok Sabha elections (*see box*). Although Congressmen knew that this went against a policy decision taken by Rajiv Gandhi, and followed by Narasimha Rao, no one pointed this out to her.

However, at an informal press get-together at Rajya Sabha deputy chairperson Najma Heptullah's residence, Sonia readily admitted that she had made a mistake. Instead of lapsing into a pout, as no doubt Narasimha Rao would have done, or blaming others as Sitaram Kesri was wont to do, she readily admitted that she had made a mistake. She said that she had been misled, that the decision was taken when she was still too new to the job. And that it would not happen again.

Of that, Congressmen are sure. Those

IN AND OUT

Sonia's Congress: who gains, who loses

Arjun Singh: Not only is he denied a Rajya Sabha nomination but sources close to 10 Janpath have assured the Thakur that though the post of working president is likely to be revived, it would not go to him. At the moment, he has to be content with being just what he professes to be: a humble loyalist to the Gandhi family. And wait for his reward at lesser levels.

Pranab Mukherjee: He has lost his job as chief draftsman. Sonia prefers Natwar Singh's style to Pranab Mukherjee's *babu* English. Leave aside that, he did not even get to draft out the political resolution and though he did switch over very nimbly from Sitaram Kesri's camp to 10 Janpath, he didn't jump high enough. Sonia preferred to make Mallikarjun Singh leader of Rajya Sabha giving Mukherjee a junior post — that of chief whip. So, if Mukherjee is somewhat more red-faced than usual, he has reason to be.

Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy: He is sulking because he was not given the CPP leadership. Instead, that went to Sharad Pawar. To make matters worse, Sonia has been very encouraging to another rival from Andhra Pradesh, the Dalit leader, G. Venkataswamy. In fact, Venkataswamy was one of those asked to speak at the AICC session. Though Reddy did get to second the resolution moved by Kesri asking Sonia to take over as party president, he still looked very gloomy.

Natwar Singh: Those who had any doubts about Singh's access to 10 Janpath must have been reassured by the sight of Singh sitting next to Sonia on the dais at the AICC session, helping her scribble her concluding remarks. In his own speech, he praised Sonia for sitting through the entire session, thus making sure that the rest of the delegates also sat through the proceedings.

Rajesh Pilot: Let alone a CWC nomination, the outspoken Pilot is even tipped for a general-secretaryship. He has the right linkage for the Congress of Sonia's dreams: he is honest, too blunt to be a yes-man and hard-working. These are qualities which do not suit Kesri's style of functioning as was obvious by the way which the former president and his acolytes treated Pilot.

Narasimha Rao: It's not that Sonia has forgiven Narasimha Rao for sidelining her while he was Prime Minister. But by giving the former PM his due respect, she is sending out a message: all Congressmen are welcome. The need of the hour is unity and not groupism — which is why she had both Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesri share the dais with her at the AICC session. And also made sure that both addressed the delegates. Kesri had not shown Rao the same courtesy in Calcutta. Or for that matter, neither had Rao been as respectful to Sonia during the time he was party chief and she the former leader's widow. A CWC nomination for Rao is on the cards.

The First Rebel

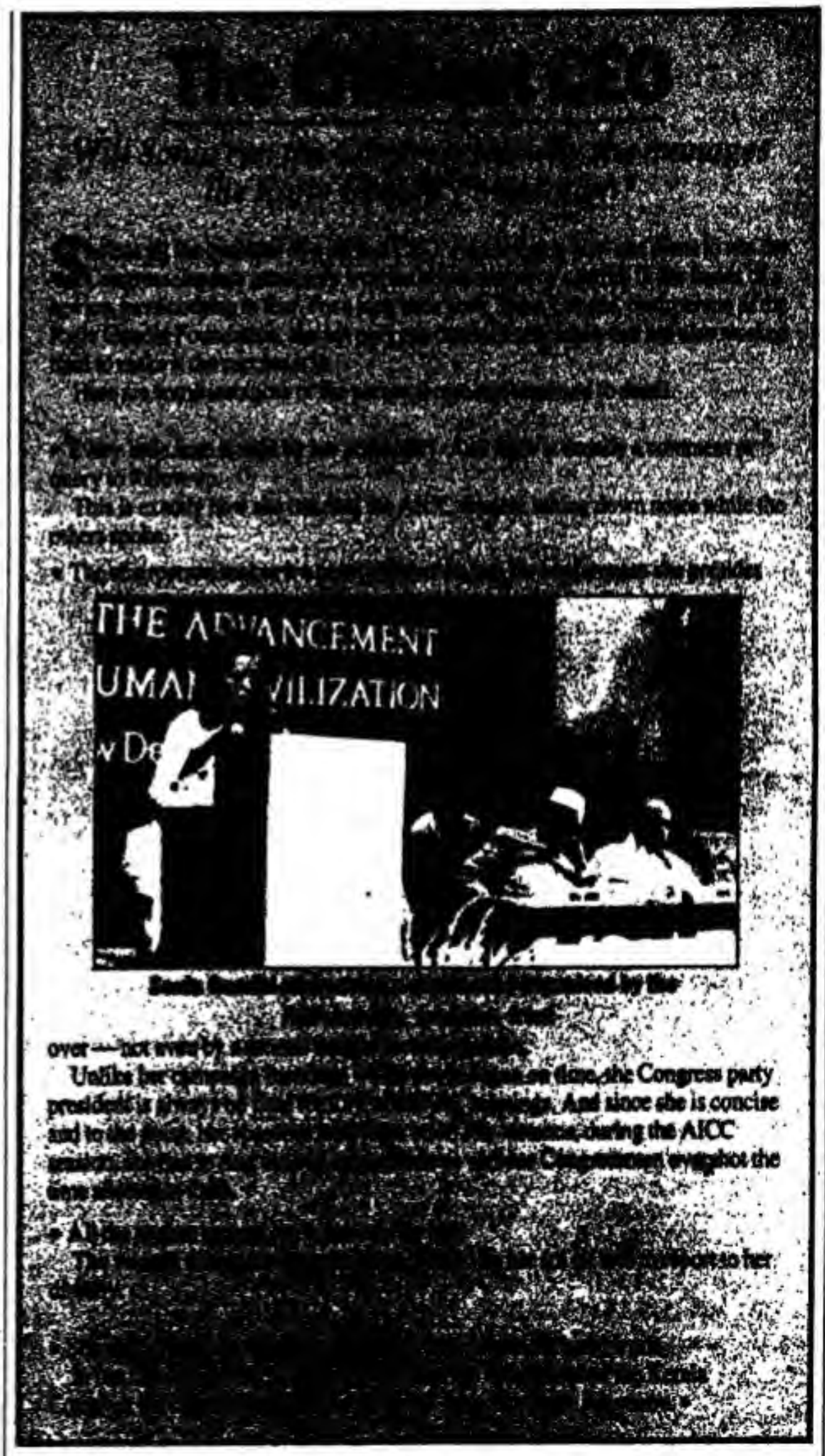
Matang Sinh was the first to speak out against Sonia's decision to nominate Lok Sabha losers to the Upper House

In political terms, Sonia has grown: from Rajiv Gandhi's widow to Rajiv Gandhi's successor

who meet her, come away with a strong sense of *deja vu*. "She is just like Indira Gandhi," said a Congress MP who had worked closely with Indira Gandhi. "When she asks you a question, she makes sure that she knows what's on your mind without giving hers away."

That much is true. No one is quite sure where Arjun Singh stands with her. If he is as close as he claims, then why didn't Sonia support him openly at the time when he split the Congress to form the Congress(T)? Why did she embarrass him at Heptullah's party by announcing in his presence that she won't give Rajya Sabha tickets to Lok Sabha losers? Then again, if he is so down and out, why did she entrust him with the task of drafting the party's political resolution?

No one is more puzzled than Arjun Singh himself. Living in isolation, where every move, every smile and every word is fodder for the press, keep-



ing her cards close to her chest would come naturally to her. But in her first interaction with the press, she did attempt to overcome her first instinct to withdraw behind the SPG cover.

Sipping black tea procured for her by aneager Margaret Alva, she took on questions from the press. For once it was not 'sources close to 10 Janpath', but the real thing. Those that would prove embarrassing for her to answer were deflected to a wounded but able K. Karunakaran sitting next to her. Such as "Karunakaran, why did the campaign not translate into votes?" No 'ji' here, but accompanied with a smile so charming that Karunakaran clearly didn't mind.

She was categorical on one point. When asked whether she had welcomed G.K. Moopanar back to the party, she took the opportunity to set the record straight. "It was he who left the party," she said. "So he must decide if he wants to come back. I have not asked anyone to come back."

Again, a touch of her imperious mother-in-law in that categorical statement.

Sometimes, she took her cue from Rajiv Gandhi rather than Indira Gandhi. When asked to criticise Jayalalitha, mindful of the fact that the Tamil Nadu doyenne was a potential ally, Sonia just laughed and told the media, "I'll leave that to you." Canned laughter followed from the obliging Congressmen grouped around her.

She's trying to reach out. Where earlier she would just wave or at best smile before whizzing in and out of government functions, she now stops, listens and even answers questions.

But can personal style substitute for hard-nosed political intervention? In an abbreviated but forceful way, Sonia Gandhi says politics can be about elegance and style. •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

SCORP NEWS

A step forward

G.K. Moopanar is referred to in political circles as the "Hamlet of Tamil Nadu" Like the Danish prince, Moopanar can never make up his mind. Moopanar's latest dilemma is whether to merge with the Congress or continue with his Tamil Maanila Congress. For the TMC itself, the poor showing in the recent election (down from 20 to three seats in the Lok Sabha) had forced re-examination of its separate regional identity.

So, last week after his return from Delhi where he had held informal talks with Congress leaders, Moopanar wanted to test the waters. In a chat with journalists, he offered to resign as the party president owning moral responsibility for the electoral defeat.

As expected it created a storm in the TMC, with two workers even attempting to commit self-immolation and some others going on hunger strike. Then Moopanar said the future course of action would be decided at the executive committee meeting at Thanjavur.

Moopanar also indicated that he would be game for "homecoming" to which Sonia Gandhi reciprocated a day later by describing the TMC as "still our friends". And Tamil Nadu Congress Committee president K.V. Thangabalu, who is facing a revolt within the party for losing deposits wherever the Congress contested, welcomed Moopanar with open arms. In fact, Thangabalu said he had been advocating the merger of the TMC with the Congress so that "Kamaraj rule" can be brought back in Tamil Nadu.

Unlike the TMC's first anniversary bash last year at Coimbatore at a time when Deve Gowda was being forced out of the prime ministership and Moopanar was tipped to succeed him — the Thanjavur meet was a subdued affair.

The recent drubbing at the hustings came as a rude shock. And the TMC's alliance with the DMK has been blowing hot and cold on several issues. The alliance survived only because of the personal rapport between Moopanar and Karunanidhi.

Said a former Congress MP, who is trying to bring Moopanar back to the parent fold: "The trouble with Moopanar is that he still remains in heart a feudal landlord who is better off manipulating and playing kingmaker. From the very inception of the TMC, the impression I gathered was that he was a reluctant player in his new avatar as the chief of a fledgling party."

Moopanar decides to retain the DMK-TMC front, despite talks of his party's merger with the Congress

Moopanar in private says that he quit the Congress because the then Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao, wanted to shove an unpopular alliance down his throat in 1996. At every opportune moment he stresses that the TMC and the Congress are the same ideologically. He also waxes eloquent about his loyalty and devotion to the Gandhi family. In fact, according to a Congress leader from Tamil Nadu, "Moopanar has met Soniaji more than any Congress leader in the past one year."

Never one to take quick decisions, Moopanar is still said to be dragging his feet, weighing all options. For all the much-vaunted goal of restoring "Kamaraj rule", the TMC still prefers to tag along with the DMK, however diffidently.

And even if Moopanar decides to merge the TMC with the Congress, some may not go along with him. Their argument is simple: the TMC was created because of constant interference in minor matters by the Congress high command. It was supposed to be a regional party that would take on the Dravidian parties in the state.

Said a former TMC MP who has of late cooled off with Moopanar: "Why should we go back to the Congress which has lost its deposit in every constituency it contested for the second election in a row? And the never ending internecine wranglings in the TNCC may come back to haunt us. There's also a lot of dead wood like Thangabalu, Prabhu and Anbarasu who will create problems for Moopanar." The overwhelming mood in the TMC rank and file is to con-

Moopanar (far left) indicated that he would be game for "homecoming" to which Sonia Gandhi reciprocated a day later by describing the TMC as "still our friends"

and back

tinue with a separate identity.

The anti-merger group is rumoured to be led by former Union minister P. Chidambaram. It is well-known that Sonia Gandhi is not favourably inclined towards him. Those close to Chidambaram say that even today, the TMC has excellent brand value and it would be suicidal for it to merge with the Congress, a party that has no roots in the state.

"The north Indian leaders of the Congress will dictate terms without realising the ground reality in the state. Instead of seeking to nationalise the TMC, Moopanar must consciously federalise it," said a TMC MLA.

So, once again Moopanar swept the merger issue under the carpet for the time being. The party executive rejected his offer of resignation from the presidentship. Chidambaram said, "It was a silly thing, so we rejected it outright." But resignations of district presidents and other functionaries were accepted.

The mood of the partymen was evident from the anti-merger slogans they raised in the presence of the party president outside the venue at Thanjavur. And Moopanar ended all speculation saying, "We will continue as good friends of the Congress, but will be a part of the United Front." A relieved Chidambaram said that the merger issue was media-created and had not been on the agenda for the meeting.

The focus has now shifted to revitalising the party. Chidambaram and others want the rank and file to know that the merger with the Congress is not an issue as the 1996 and 1998 polls showed that the TMC is the real Congress in Tamil Nadu. There is pressure on Moopanar to stop his vociferous support for Sonia Gandhi which rakes up the merger issue at press conferences.

Next week, Moopanar is planning to tour the districts to find out ways and means of mobilising people's support in order to strengthen the party. He has realised that unless he shores up the TMC at the grass roots, the party has no future. Already caste-based parties like Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) and Puthiya Tamilakam (PT) have eaten into its vote-bank.

The once powerful regional satrap has also realised that DMK men are overjoyed with his current plight. In private, they say it was Moopanar who was not willing to part with seats for the CPI(M), PT, etc., in the last elections which led to a split in votes.

With Jayalalitha and her associates like Vazhapadi Ramamurthy and Subramanian Swamy putting pressure on the BJP for the dismissal of the Karunanidhi government, they say that Assembly elections are round the corner. Already talks are on for a realignment of forces which means the DMK-TMC front will have to fight the next elections in the company of the Congress, CPI(M), CPI, PT and others.

In the final report of Justice M.C. Jain — which has also been leaked — there is no evidence to establish the involvement of the DMK as a whole in the conspiracy to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi. So, it is no longer politically untouchable for the Congress, and Moopanar who has a pathological hatred for Jayalalitha will work on Sonia to clear the matter. Moopanar says that the DMK-TMC alliance is intact.

A beaming Karunanidhi said recently: "At a time when all and sundry cry hoarse against me and demand the dismissal of the DMK government, Moopanar's bold stand is pleasing. We are on the same wavelength."

For the time being, Moopanar is saved from making up his mind on whether to go back to the Congress, as his new mission seems to be to line up all anti-Jayalalitha forces in Tamil Nadu. •

Sreedhar Pillai/Madras

INDER MALHOTRA

Short shrift

Why is India's nuclear policy being treated so lightly by our politicians?

Never before has Indian nuclear policy been treated so cynically and damagingly as during the Lok Sabha debates on the confidence vote and the President's address. Moreover, there was a shocking lack of knowledge of matters nuclear. So great was the temptation to embarrass and needle the BJP in the Congress and the United Front benches that the nuclear issue was used as a stick to beat the saffron party with.

To say this is not to pretend that there cannot be two opinions on whether this country should exercise the nuclear option and "induct nuclear weapons", as the BJP had advocated in its party manifesto as well as its National Agenda. But surely these matters have to be discussed realistically, not in a frenzy of partisan passions.

The fundamental reality to be borne in mind is that from 1964, when China's first nuclear bomb went up, the core of Indian nuclear policy has been that the country must never be vulnerable to nuclear attack or blackmail. That is why Indira Gandhi demonstrated Indian nuclear capability at Pokhran in 1974. Since then, all governments have scrupulously updated nuclear technology. They have also resolutely refused to sign the CTBT or the NPT or to give up the nuclear option. Relentless pressure from mighty nuclear weapon powers has made no change in this national stance.

Only on the need to exercise the option have all concerned, with the solitary exception of the BJP, been either silent, or ambiguous or mealy-mouthed. Ironically, even the BJP had watered down its commitment to induct nuclear weapons before the Lok Sabha debates. At first, Atal Behari Vajpayee declared that the nuclear weapons would be inducted, "if necessary". Then his defence minister George Fernandes further diluted the BJP-led government's stance, making it indistinguishable from what P.V. Narasimha Rao and I.K. Gujral had stood for.

It is even more regrettable that such prominent members like former Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar, former Speaker Sangma, and former foreign minister Pranab Mukherjee, should have used the nuclear question as political football, giving imperatives of Indian security and the need for national consensus on an issue of great sensitivity short shrift.

Towards this end, some of these eminent MPs quoted Pakistan's hawkish foreign minister Gauhar Ayub, who is not taken seriously in his own country. This worthy is beseeching the US to impose sanctions on India. Only a few weeks ago, he had declared that Pakistan would "not give up nuclear weapons" even if India signed the CTBT because of "the overwhelming Indian conventional superiority". Other realities, apart from China's great and growing nuclear might, are the apparently unending China-Pakistan collaboration in the fields of nuclear technology and missiles. A high-level American delegation is in Beijing currently trying to persuade China to terminate nuclear help to Iran and Pakistan in return for the latest US missile technology!

Defence minister George Fernandes: safety first

The way our nuclear policy has been denigrated in Parliament must delight those who have been clamouring that the Indian nuclear capability be "first capped, then reduced, and finally eliminated"

The way Indian nuclear policy has been denigrated in Parliament must delight those, led by nuclear fundamentalists of America, who have been clamouring that the Indian nuclear capability should be "first capped, then reduced over time and finally eliminated". Of late, they had stopped harping on a rollback, insisting only a cap, knowing that this would automatically degrade the unexercisable option. These ladies and gentlemen can now afford to relax. Their job is being done for them by Indian politicians. •

At the helm

Kushabhau Thakre is all set to take over as the BJP president

"A BJP government is at the Centre and all's well with the party," grinned a Bharatiya Janata Party worker. But not everybody in the party feels that way. For, after a difficult election and several rounds of negotiations with allies, the party has finally found a footing at the Centre. The government is in the saddle despite the initial hiccups.

However, one major task still remains.

The BJP has to finalise its candidate for the post of party president before the organisational elections to be held later this month.

Scheduled in October last, the party elections were called off because of mid-term polls. The BJP had announced that the present party president, L.K. Advani, would get an extension till the general elections were over. This strategy also took care of the party's dilemma in projecting Kushabhau Thakre, a senior leader in its Madhya Pradesh unit, as its future president. "We need a known face to lead the party to the polls," explained a BJP general secretary.

However, technical reasons dictate that the decision is not put off any further. An Advani-sponsored amendment to the party constitution some years ago had made it mandatory for a president to step down after two terms. In order to allow another two-year term to Advani, the party would have had to amend the constitution. Naturally, he was loath to press for this.

Therefore, a via media was found. The extension of Advani's term was treated as an interim measure till the general elections were over. The focus now is on an organisational man as the party chief. And Thakre fits in very well. "We do not want to rely on the government too much. We have to make the party stronger," said Thakre. This is exactly what the BJP is looking for.

But Thakre's candidature has not been painless.

It is true that other contenders who were in the race before the general elections have become irrelevant. Leaders like Murli Manohar Joshi have been co-opted into politics at the Centre and Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, the Rajasthan chief minister, has been left badly rattled by the pathetic electoral performance in his state.

While Atal Behari Vajpayee was keen on Shekhawat, the latter is more involved in state politics to spare any time for organisational work. Plus, Rajasthan is due for Assembly elections at the end of the year.

"We do not want to rely on the government too much. We have to make the party stronger," said Thakre. A hard-core RSS man, Thakre is also known for his discipline and organisational abilities

It is not that Thakre's credentials are suspect. He is considered close to Advani. A hard-core RSS man, Thakre is also known for his discipline and organisational abilities.

However, party workers complain, "Thakre will just be Advani's rubber stamp." Also, what is causing disquiet in party circles is that the real force behind Thakre will be the general secretary, K.N. Govindacharya. Though Govindacharya and Thakre shared a rocky relationship some years ago when the former had criticised the way BJP's Madhya Pradesh unit was being run, they have patched up since. And this has disturbed the balance of power among the various factions.

Already in charge of party affairs, Govindacharya is deeply involved in organisational work. Given Thakre's age and state of health, partymen see Govindacharya as gearing himself for a greater responsibility within the organisation.

The ratification of Thakre's name as the party president is only a matter of formality now. And since important party functionaries have become Union ministers, the new president will have to nominate new members to these slots in order to abide by the one-man-one-post rule.

So the month of May will see many new faces in the BJP. Thakre's will not be the only one. •

Anuja Pande/New Delhi

The importance of be

He is one man the BJP-led coalition can't do without

He's known for courting controversy. Despite losing the polls from Bombay (North-East), it was clear that he would soon be back on the centrestage. And now, it is clear that Pramod Mahajan is one man the BJP-led coalition can't do without.

His links with industry are well known. His pragmatic approach to politics gives him a headstart over others in the *sangh parivar* as he does not have a closed mind — to anything. Since he has grown from within the RSS ranks, he is not viewed with suspicion within the Clan. And by being media-savvy, Mahajan has been able to project an image of grace and sophistication, especially when the BJP's critics would like to see it as a party of brick worshipper and assorted loonies with matted locks.

However, though he was expected to bounce back after the electoral setback, few thought that the journey would begin from the PMO. Of various slots that were considered for his rehabilitation, political secretary to Prime Minister was the one least deliberated because there was no precedent of former Prime Ministers appointing a political heavyweight as a close aide.

But, having emerged, as a BJP source agreed, as the "third-most important man in the government" (after Vajpayee and Advani), Mahajan has also risked his political future by agreeing to be an aide to the Prime Minister. Because, there is near unanimity in the BJP circles that if Mahajan succeeds in fulfilling his brief — holding the coalition together — then the kudos will go to Vajpayee. But, if things go awry for the government, it is Mahajan who will draw the flak.

There's no denying, however, that Mahajan's appointment to the sensitive post has greater political implications. As a BJP source pointed out, this

Mahajan's elevation to the PMO is indicative of the viewpoint that his future lies within the government or the parliamentary wing of the party and not the organisation *per se*

Pramod Mahajan with Bal Thackeray: right connections

ing Pramod Mahajan

is first time in India that a general secretary of the ruling party is working from within PMO. "This is the first glimpse of the real relationship between the government and the *sangathan* in a BJP government. The organisation is always supreme," adds another BJP source.

In fact, the nature of relationship between the party and the government that has come to light does not show the government in a very positive light. Depending on which way you wish to look at the maze of issues involved, you could say that Vajpayee is being dictated all the time by 'Big Brother' from Nagpur. Alternatively, you could also argue that being a true democrat, Vajpayee does not take any decision without consulting his party (and RSS) colleagues. But, whatever the conclusion, there is no denying that we have a Prime Minister who is not his own master.

While what happened over '*la affaire*' Jaswant Singh is well known, it is not well known that Vajpayee also did not have a direct say in Mahajan's appointment. Party insiders say that after assuming office, the Prime Minister had sought "someone senior" from the party to assist him. Party general secretaries — including Mahajan — reportedly met Advani on 1 April and it was decided at the meeting that Mahajan would be sent on 'deputation' to the PMO. The decision was conveyed to Vajpayee who got the papers formalised on Thursday, the next day.

It is not that Vajpayee is displeased with the party's choice over whom to place in the PMO. In fact, given the fragile nature of the ruling coalition, Vajpayee will find Mahajan's ability to deal with the allies in good stead. His proximity to an industrial group (that was also instrumental in finally making Jayalalitha see reason) will be an added advantage while dealing with 'problem' allies. Moreover, Mahajan's anti-*swadeshi* viewpoint will help Vajpayee in performing a balancing act with the pro-*swadeshi* finance minister in Yashwant Sinha.

Atal Behari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani: will depend on Mahajan's ability to deal with the allies

Despite the general impression that Mahajan is an Advani-loyalist and — by implication — not much liked by Vajpayee, the reality is actually slightly different. It was Vajpayee who first picked Mahajan. It was during Vajpayee's initial tenure as BJP president, in the early 1980s, that Mahajan was made president of the party's youth wing. For the college teacher, who was also writing for the RSS newspaper *Tarun Bharat*, that was the big leap to national politics.

After Advani's elevation in 1986 as party president, following the party's decision to shed the liberal facade, Mahajan had to make an effort to get close to Advani who initially dismissed Mahajan as all show and no substance. However, Mahajan's real flirtation with limelight started in 1990 when he was deputed to be Advani's charioteer in the Rath Yatra. Since then, Mahajan has been perceived in the public eye as an Advani-loyalist, while in reality, he maintained close ties with Vajpayee even during the years when he was 'out' within the scheme of things within the *sangh*.

Mahajan's appointment to the PMO is also indicative of the BJP's internal assessment of its second-rank leadership. With the BJP showing a clear demarcation between leaders with good organisational skills and the ability to manage government, Mahajan's elevation is indicative of the viewpoint that his future lies within the government — or the parliamentary wing of the party — and not the organisation *per se*. As far as the organisation is concerned, it is likely to remain under the charge of more traditional leaders like Kushabhau Thakre in the short run and K.N. Govindacharya in the long run.

After the electoral setback, few thought that Mahajan's journey would begin from the PMO. But today, he has emerged as the "third-most important man in the government"

There is no denying that politically, Mahajan's is not in an enviable position. His views on economic liberalisation further queer the pitch. Though a nephew of Swadeshi Jagran Manch national co-convenor, Rabrindra Mahajan, he is known as an open advocate of liberalisation. His links with a section of industry has distanced him somewhat from several influential members of the *sangh parivar*. But, at a time when the RSS is shedding its political puritanism, Mahajan's role as the chief 'hobnobber' of the RSS clan has also come in for appreciation.

Within the BJP, there is a realisation that Power Brokers are a reality and that they can be kept in check only by people who understand the "grammar" they use. Mahajan clearly is one of them. BJP leaders reckon wryly that Mahajan has the makings of a trapeze artist — and there is no better place for him than the PMO. •

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay/New Delhi

The baby of the House

Ommer Abdullah is still rubbing the starlight from his eyes

"There is a sense of awe when you walk into Parliament," said 27-year-old Ommer Abdullah when asked about his first day as MP. "These are the steps that you've seen people like Rajiv Gandhi and Indira Gandhi — these were in my time — climb up. And these are steps where you've seen Manmohan Singh with his briefcase as he went in to present his Budget..." he said. "And now these are the steps you walk up, not because you are visiting, but because you belong there," he added with a satisfied smile.

Ommer is still idealistic enough to be in awe of Parliament and all that it stands for. He was so excited to be part of the country's highest legislative body that he spent his first day walking around in circles exploring. Those watching him trying to enter the visitors' gallery laughed and said, "Looks like Dr Farooq Abdullah's son has lost his way."

But as Ommer says, "That's not fair. I was walking around because I was trying to see where everything was. I'd like to leave these people in Srinagar and see them trying to find their way to my residence." And then adds with a philosophical shrug, "A few wrong turns here and there don't make much of a difference."

Especially if daddy is around to bail you out.

But in the first session itself, Ommer made it quite clear that there was more to him than just being Farooq Abdullah's son. In his maiden speech, he spoke of the special problems faced by his state. Which differed a great deal from that of his party colleague, Saifuddin Soz. During the vote of confidence, Soz had concentrated on attacking the BJP. Young Abdullah preferred to steer clear of politics and instead concentrated on the needs of the state.

The difference of opinion amongst the two members of the National Conference came to the fore during the vote of confidence. As party president, Farooq

"I was walking around because I was trying to see where everything was..." And then Ommer adds with a philosophical shrug, "A few wrong turns here and there don't make much of a difference"

Abdullah had stated that his party would abstain from voting: effectively, it would not stand in the way of a BJP government at the Centre. The minute Soz heard about this, he wrote a letter of protest, which he first released to the press, and then sent off to Srinagar.

In other words, the media had a look at it before Ommer did.

Which is why when Ommer came out of Parliament on the eve of the vote and the media tried to question him, Soz immediately drew the young man away from the press. "Not now," said Soz putting his arm around Abdullah. "He'll think about it and answer tomorrow."

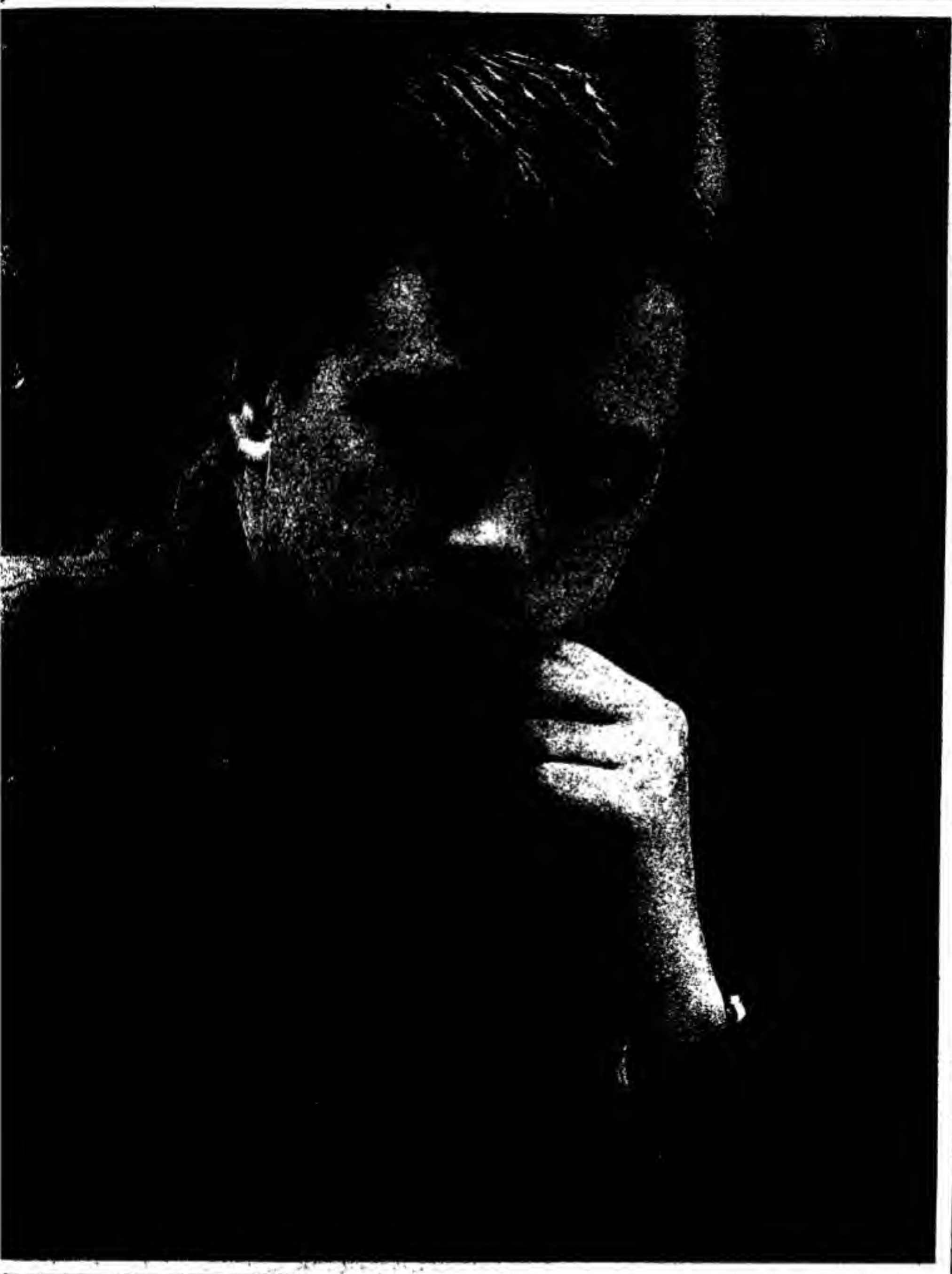
But Soz was in for a shock. Ommer shrugged his arm off and said politely but firmly that he could answer questions right then and there. He went on to explain that the party's support to the BJP would be issue-based rather than something that could be taken for granted. At the same time, he saw no sense in opposing the BJP just for the sake of opposition. And so on.

It was only later that he got what he calls the surprise of his life. "Later, in the car, Mr Soz whipped out this piece of paper and said: 'You should know — I released this today,' recalls Ommer. "And I said: 'Oh my God, this goes totally against what I have said...'"

It doesn't matter. Soz isn't complaining. And at the crucial time, the National Conference decision to abstain, was unanimous.

Just two months ago, the MBA was sitting in an air-conditioned office in Gurgaon, selling real estate. Today, he is still spinning yarns, but with a more national perspective. He talks of bringing tourists back to Kashmir, but in the same breath, is the first to acknowledge with a laugh that yes, it is easy for Ommer Abdullah and his black cats to tell hapless tourists — 'Come, visit the valley'. Yet he is also idealistic enough to hope that all this will change — very soon. In fact, he genuinely believes he *can* make a difference, here at the Centre.

So, he's naive. But the youthful optimism and the enthusiasm with which Ommer's taken on his new job makes a refreshing change from the cynicism of some of his older colleagues. The chinars of Kashmir will still turn gold-brown this autumn. But look hard and you'll see persistent, pesky green shoots peeking out stubbornly from among them. •



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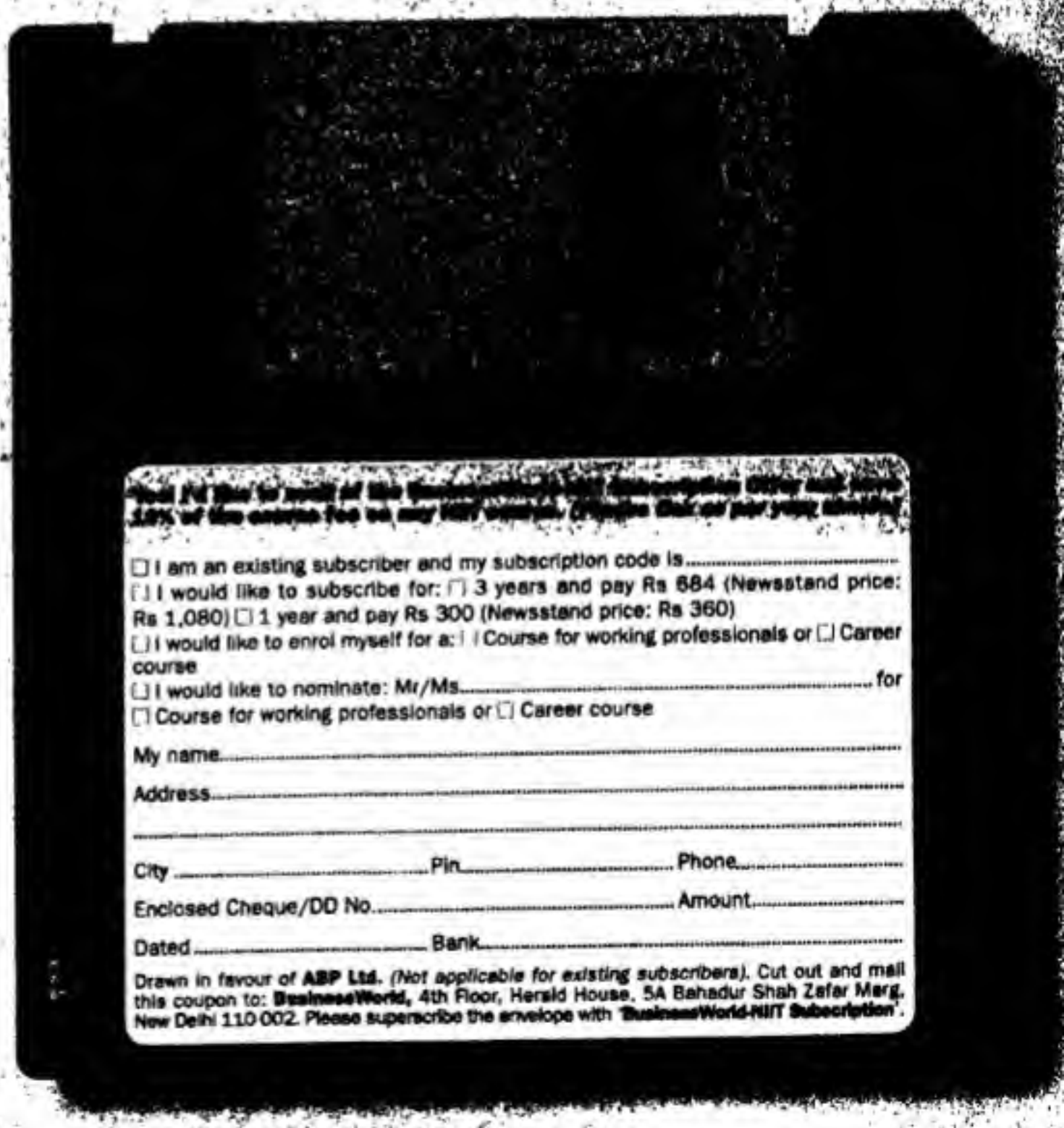

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

[redacted] "If you really want to know the true me, meet my parents," Amitabh Bachchan had once said. And now, the son is paying tribute to his father. On 12 April, Big B read out passages from Harivansh Rai Bachchan's masterpiece *Madhushala* amidst the glitterati at Delhi's Maurya Sheraton. Reading dad's poems is nothing new for Amitabh — it is something which he has been doing since his younger days. Only now, he has decided to make his feelings public. A rarity for a man who so zealously guards his privacy.

Amitabh Bachchan: paying tribute

TURNING A CORNER

[redacted] Anglo-Asian band Cornershop has done the impossible: dislodge Celine *Titanic* Dion from the top slot of the UK pop charts. Quite a comeback.

Cornershop wasn't in the mainstream UK music market until last year, when their album *When I Was Born For The 7th Time* created ripples. This year, even the stuffy British music critics had to sit up and take notice. But the best was saved for last: the Norman Cook remix of *Brimful Of Asha*

Lead singer Tjinder Singh and the cover of *When I Was Born For The 7th Time*: music of our times

shot straight to number one in March. Making history of sorts, because Cornershop has been the first Anglo-Asian band to make it to the top.

In today's world of music, where Oasis is famous for 'bad behaviour' and the Spice Girls for being outrageous, Cornershop fans simply say that the band is "so nice". And critics: "Their music impels you to spend an afternoon opening doors for old ladies and washing other people's dogs." Not bad?

LENSMAN'S VIEW

[redacted] 'What has Independence meant for Indian women?' A trite topic. And you're tired of hearing cerebral views. But photographers always have something different to say. And they are expressing their views — through their lenses — at Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi. The occasion: celebrating 50 years of Indian Independence.

A photograph on display: woman power

With the powerful visuals in black and white from ace lensmen like Raghu Rai, Dayanita Singh, Pamela Singh, Sheena Sippy, Atul Kasbekar, Sebastiao Salgado, Rafique Syed among others, the exhibition of photographs presented by Point of View and Aalochana — two non-profit organisations — is on view from 3 to 14 April. The exhibition will then move on to Madras and Bangalore and 16 other cities.

FOR ARTISTS' SAKE

To say that wives of business tycoons dabble in arts because they have time to spare would be a generalisation. Tina, Anil Ambani's famous ex-actress spouse, goes on a genuine high when it comes to good paintings. On her first visit to Calcutta, Mrs Ambani announced The Harmony Show, a Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL)-sponsored exhibition of paintings by 125 artists at Bombay's Nehru Centre.

"Calcutta is the mother of all arts," she said. "It's vibrant and alive here and I'm going to present this art to the rest of the country." The Harmony Show gives young artists freedom to express their own thematic interpretations of 'harmony'. "It's a serious endeavour to promote new talent and to provide a platform to showcase their talents alongside the masters," she said. Sounds encouraging.

Tina Ambani in Calcutta: reliance on art

FROM RAO TO ROY

If winning the Booker was unexpected for Arundhati Roy, there was a bigger surprise in store for her later. For she was definitely not expecting the former Prime Minister of India, P.V. Narasimha Rao's letter in her fan mail.

But that's precisely what happened.

Rao, whose own book is creating waves in Delhi, was so taken in by Roy's *God of Small Things* that the minute he finished her book, he sat down to write a letter of appreciation to the author. The book, he described as 'unputdownable', has definitely got more than what the author had ever imagined — one of the most prestigious awards and now a high-profile fan.

However, with Rao's book hitting the stands, what remains to be seen is whether Roy will return the compliment or not.

Arundhati Roy, and P.V. Narasimha Rao (inset): pen friends

LOVE'S LABOUR

A school run by eunuchs in Patna is gutted. But the hijras *are determined to pursue their venture*

Rajkumari watched helplessly as the fire spread and flames leapt skyward. It was 11 o'clock on a clear, spring day in Patna. A mild breeze blew across the Ashok Van slum, fanning the vicious blaze engulfing rows of rickety hutments. Rajkumari ran helter skelter, vainly pouring buckets of water into the hissing fire and cocking up her — or maybe his — ears now and then to catch the reassuring din of approaching firetenders. But none arrived, at least not in time. And in just about an hour on 19 March, the 200 huts of Ashok Van was reduced to ashes.

And so was the school Rajkumari, a eunach, had built.

Rajkumari is a *hijra* (transvestite) with a difference. Unlike other members of her sexless and ostracised clan who drift through life as social debris, Rajkumari is driven by a mission. She built and ran — till the fire broke out — a school for poor slum children.

And this was not the first time that the school was gutted. A similar blaze in 1994 had destroyed the school, and Rajkumari, refusing to be broken, had built it all over again.

Six years ago, 35-year-old Rajkumari alias Lalan Hijra got together with a few other eunachs to begin her fight against illiteracy. "We decided to do something for the slum children," Rajkumari recalls, and the school was founded. They called it the Jhuggi-Jhopri Bal Vikas Vidyalaya, offering education from nursery upto the middle-school level.

It was a unique endeavour by Patna's community of about 200 *hijras*. "We formed a Hijra Fund to meet the expenses," says Rajkumari, who prefers a feminine identity to the masculine Lalan, her real name. "We contribute a part of whatever little we earn from singing and dancing to run the school." The institution, which has 535 children on its rolls, provides free education, including free supply of books and writing material. In addition, they are given mid-day meals consisting *khichdi* and mashed potatoes, and free rides to school by rickshaws for those living far.

As for the staff, the school has four teachers, three of them women, earning Rs 500 per month, a peon, and a female attendant. Two of the teachers, Bijli and Gita, are themselves *hijras*. This in itself is a major achievement in a community far removed from education.

The hurdles seemed insurmountable in the beginning, recalls Rajkumari. The local residents eyed them with suspicion. But in course of time, they won

KRISHNA MURARI KISHAN

The school before it was burnt. It provided 535 children with free education, including books and writing material. Children were also given mid-day meals and free rides on rickshaws

people's hearts.

Born in Delhi, Rajkumari studied up to Class V and, at the age of ten, left home, came to Patna, and here she has lived ever since. "I have been inspired to act because of the discrimination which eunuchs faced in society. Of course, seeing street urchins whiling away their time pained me also," she says.

Their years of perseverance has paid off, says Rajkumari. Moved by their dedication, the Bihar Pradesh Jan Kalyan Seva Sansthan, a voluntary organisation, has stepped forward to shoulder the responsibility of running the school.

How much does it cost to run the institution? About Rs 35,000 annually, says Rajkumari. "And that's nothing", she hastens to add, "if children of the poor get to read and write." Indeed, the students belong to the most backward and oppressed castes and classes such as the Mushara (rat-catchers), Dome (night-soil carriers) rickshaw-pullers, sweepers and vegetable vendors.

"We are considered untouchables by society. But we have hearts cleaner than most people," says Rajkumari. And the goodness in her is no merely confined to running a school. Of late, she is also picking up orphan children and giving them shelter.

Bhola Manjhi, a resident of Ashok Van, is happy that Rajkumari and the other *hijras* opened this school. His two sons study here. "Earlier, I was suspicious, but now I am ashamed of having doubted their intention. Earlier, I was scared that they would set a wrong precedent in the locality, but later I saw they were improving the lives of our children," says Bhola.

Nine-year-old Babloo Kumar says he enjoys going to the school and finds nothing wrong either with his teachers or other eunuchs running it. No one ever makes fun of them, he avers, and if any one does, elders deal very sternly.

Ajay Ram is ten years old. He is thankful for getting a chance to study. "I longed to go to school but couldn't because my father couldn't pay. Now I go to school, and also get food there. I also get books and copies free!" says the excited student.

Rajkumari's bold endeavours have attracted the attention of Patna's politicians. The champions of the backwards say they have "helped" her school from time to time. But despite their professed patronage, the children still have to do without furniture. In their classes, they sit on gunny sacks spread out on the earthen floor.

But all this was before the fire broke out. Now, only a heap of ash and charred bamboos remain. Rajkumari, however, says she is determined to rebuild the school, and elevate it to the matriculation level if possible. "All the papers have been sent to the education department," she told SUNDAY.

For Rajkumari and her fellow *hijras*, a challenge still lies ahead. Will someone give them a helping hand? •

Naved Zahir/Patna

The insider

An Indian spends ten days in a black box at a London gallery

When Ansuman Biswas climbed into a sound-proof, light-proof black box in a London gallery, people wanted to know why. But the 32-year-old Calcutta-born artist and musician had his own reasons. He was going to spend ten days sealed in the 9ft-by-7ft box, living completely in the dark and unaware of time, to solve the paradox of Schroedinger's Cat, an experiment in the realm of quantum physics.

In the total darkness, he was also going to go without food and practise the 2,500-year-old Indian science of Vipasana, while keeping a close watch on all physical phenomena, as a method of investigation constrasting with that of Western sciences.

But why did he decide on an art gallery? How could a man locked up in a box be an exhibit? And what did Schroedinger's Cat have to do with the South London Gallery?

A lot, evidently, according to the organisers. The gallery which organised the exhibition together with The Arts Catalyst — an agency organising combined science-art projects — had no doubt about the significance of the experiment.

"Ansuman's work is an opportunity for deep self-investigation. It is more an expression of what is happening in other people's heads, not his own," said Arts Catalyst founder Nicola Triscott. "What some may find unusual, an art gallery crowd will not," said curator David Thorp. The ten-day experiment was also part of Parallel Universe, an on-going project at the gallery in association with Arts Catalyst, to challenge the idea that science was the exclusive preserve of Western culture.

Certainly the art world found it a unique experiment. A steady stream of viewers — between 150 and 200 each day — came to the gallery to look at the lonely black box. Most were young, indicating how Biswas' quest may have caught the imagination of the British youth more than it did the elderly.

He stepped inside at 9.00 pm on Friday (13 March), after a talk by physicist David Peat. Biswas then explained why he was up to it: "I would like to give a representation of the fact that we are each in a box. I have no intention of endorsing denial and hardship. Each of us inhabits a cosmos and viewers of my art are clearly faced only with their own reactions."

A percussionist and a composer by profession, Biswas has performed with Scandinavian pop icon Bjork, and composed for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. He studied Indian music at Dartington College, Devon, and has been practising Vipasana for the past 12 years.

Prior to the experiment, Biswas went without food for a few days to clear his system. Then he stepped into the box, taking with him 30 litres of water and a mattress. There was a fan to keep the air circulating and a panic button in case he felt too enclosed.

Initially, a response gong was set up, using which he could draw the attention of people, telling them that he was doing fine. But after two days, he left instructions not to be disturbed.

And on the tenth day, exactly at 9.00 pm, Biswas stepped out of the box in candle-light. After coming out, he observed that it had been an "incredible" experience.

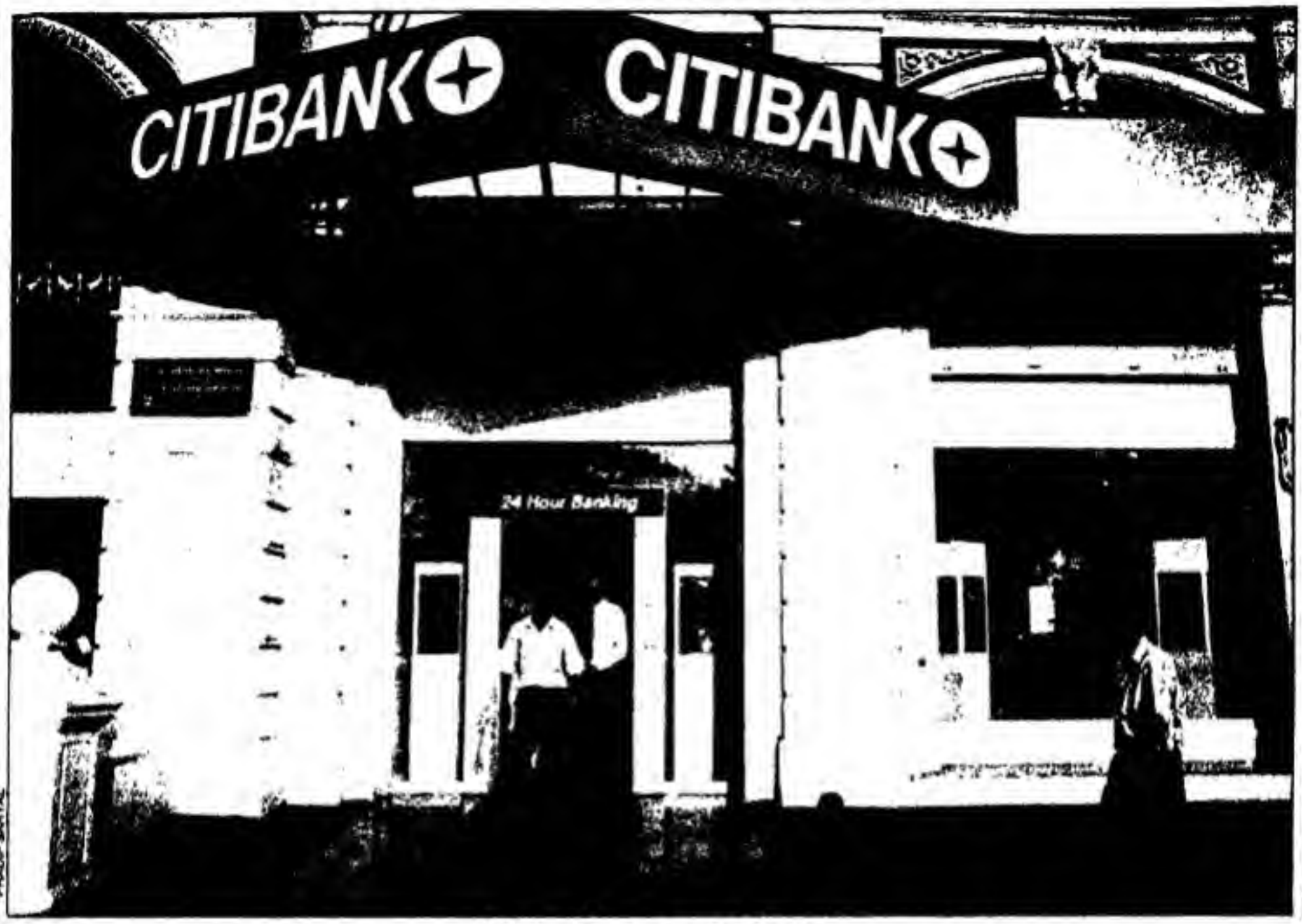
"The most important thing was to focus on the comparative study between quantum physics and Vipasana," he told SUNDAY. "This project is a work of art. It's not important what I felt in the box. It is for other people to come and view the box and I am interested in their thoughts and their reactions," he said.

Interestingly, Biswas was watched closely by Amnesty International who wanted to use Biswas' experience to record the effects of solitary confinement on prisoners. In a series of lectures on the experiment at the Imperial College, London, Biswas will be talking about his days in the darkness. •

Shrabani Basu/London

The box on display: experiment with truth; (inset) Ansuman Biswas

Sitting in darkness, without food and unaware of time, Ansuman had two objectives: solve the paradox of Schroedinger's Cat and practise the 2,500-year-old Indian science of *Vipasana*



PRADIP SANYAL

A Citibank office: market leader

Buy now, pay later

Despite a slowdown in Indian economy, the credit card business goes into overdrive

The numbers are daunting. The Indian credit card market is currently estimated at a whopping Rs 1,600 crore and growing at a phenomenal rate of 15 per cent annually. Research organisations have just announced that despite the slump in the economy, consumers' spending habits have not reduced and have maintained a steady trend for an estimated 7,90,000-crore middle class people for the last two years. Amid such boom times, it's easily understandable as to why American Express launched a high-prized gold card, the latest addition, which hopes to radically alter the face of the plastic money market.

"Why worry about the economic downturn? Could it be any worse than the downsizing and corporate restructuring we've been living with during the low market conditions for the last two years? But on the flip side, the market for plastic money has never suffered and has been constantly growing...We have just scratched its surface," exults Sanjay Rishi, country manager for American Express.

Rishi is right. Recent surveys done by the Indian Market Research Bureau (IMRB) — nation's largest research agency — on behalf of the bank has revealed some startling facts. Studies have shown a demand as high as 78 per cent among Indian cardholders for premium cards, ostensibly because of a host of special services and benefits offered by the banks on such premium cards.

The estimates are astounding. American Express hopes to rake in a significant number of subscribers with the card that comes at an annual membership fee of Rs 3,100 and has a powerful value package which is virtually unparalleled in the Indian card market. With more than two-and-a-half million existing cardholders, American Express has been

registering a mind-boggling growth of nearly 45 per cent annually in the Indian market that also has other major players like Citibank, ANZ Grindlays, Standard Chartered, Hongkong Bank and a host of nationalised banks.

"And mind you, our growth has been despite the fact that we are in the charge card market. Here we cannot carry the credit forward with a specified interest rate. And unlike other cards, our cards do not have any spending limits but you need to pay the entire amount next month. This is indeed significant growth," adds Sujit Mitra, manager, public affairs and communications, American Express.

Agrees Citibank, the undisputed market leader with more than 54 per cent share, though in the credit card market, having a network that not many can match in the country. "We have been in the business for more than two decades and we have a product range which offers a host of benefits. Indian consumers have a tremendous spending capacity and have endorsed cards from Citibank because of the tremendous brand value that is attached with the card," says S. Singh, a senior manager at Citibank's card centre in the Indian Capital.

According to Singh, Citibank's growth has been primarily because of being one of the early players in the market and triggering off the plastic money boom in a country where spending was hitherto limited to annual family budgets. "The boom actually started in the mid-Eighties and continues till date, despite certain current apprehensions (about the slump in the market)," adds Singh.

An Indian bank: lacking in aggressive marketing

The Indian credit card market is valued at Rs 1,600 crore and is growing by 15 per cent every year. In fact, studies have shown that despite the steep fees, 78 per cent of cardholders in India prefer premium cards

How are the banks expanding? Besides Citibank, which has an annual growth of 34 per cent per annum, ANZ Grindlays has been increasing at a rate of 21 per cent, followed by relatively newcomers like Standard Chartered and a host of other Indian banks. Such has been the growth that State Bank of India (SBI), after prolonged negotiations with several international banks, including American Express — finally joined hands with GE Caps to enter the credit card market.

"There is enough room for everybody. We have managed more than 1,00,000 cardholders during the last couple of years we have got into this business and currently service our cardholders through our network of over 23 branches and 50 ATMs across seven cities in the country," says Vivek Kudva, manager (card products division) of Hongkong Bank, which bagged the Euromoney Award for Excellence in 1997.

And along with the growth in the card business has come an increased growth in advantages and services offered by various banks. Interest free periods have increased, cash withdrawal limits hiked, 24-hour services offered, insurance packages now include even home cover and membership reward programmes can guarantee a cardholder the best of times. "With increasing trend towards avoiding carrying cash, a card is the best answer in today's market. Especially at odd times, it comes in handy. Well, I may also add that a card often tempts you to spend but that's you who has to make a decision," observes Ranjan Paul, India manager, Internet Services Corporation, a subsidiary of the Amway Group that is starting operations in India

this month.

Adds Gautam Ghosh, senior manager at Technova Du Pont: "As markets are growing, the average Indian is realising the need to adapt to the market forces. Hence, a card is seen as a necessity for an average, middle-class Indian. It'sno longer a luxury. And that is one of the major reasons for the growth of the market where multinational banks and Indian banks are recording an increasing number of customers."

Agrees Rishi, whose bank once proudly claimed in an ad campaign that the American Express card was Quite Frankly Not For Everyone. "Well, let's understand the fact that the market has since then grown by leaps and bounds and our research shows that a steady change in the consumer base from sheer upper middle class to middle class where consumers are spending quite a lot on cards. So we also felt the need to increase our consumer base by widening our reach."

Where does it leave the Indian banks? Market analysts agree that the balance is titled heavily in the favour of foreign banks whose aggressive marketing strategies and benefits outpace the Indian banks offering cards. Independent studies done by agencies like IMRB, ORG-MARG and Mode have shown a distinct slow growth in the credit cards division of the Indian banks, ostensibly because of lack of focus of nationalised banks in developing the plastic money business despite having the advantage of an all-India network.

"I would disagree with the notion the foreign banks have better services than Indian banks offering credit cards. A host of Indian banks got into the credit card business initially by offering charge cards and later shifting to credit cards. What they lacked then and continue to lack now is aggressive marketing of these cards to its clients. And also, the Indian banks lack what is commonly known as the arm-twisting tendencies of these foreign banks once a cardholder defaults on payments," says Abhijit Ghosh, public relations manager at the Central Bank that recently decided against issuing fresh credit cards to check its whopping balance of outstandings.

How serious is the business of outstandings? Fairly serious and running to crores of rupees, say all bankers. A few banks have hired private collection agencies on high commission rates and have also recruited retired police officials to handle cases of defaulted payments and frauds. "Often people accuse multinational banks for arm-twisting customers. But please that remember we hand over the case to agencies as the last resort...And it happens after 12 reminders and personal visits," remarks a senior official of a multinational bank, requesting anonymity.

Such has been the nature of debts that the India Co-Operation Committee, an umbrella organisation of 23 banks in the country, is working fast towards setting up the nation's first Negative File System in the credit card industry. "In today's world of technology and information exchange, a defaulter whose name appears on the list would find it difficult to approach any bank, financial institution, non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) or other lending organisations to obtain any credit," said a recent circular issued by the committee.

"This is one of the most positive moves initiated by the industry and I am sure we all will benefit from this. American Express, for one, has been constantly advocating for exchange of data that would help all of us detect defaulters," adds Rishi.

Sanjay Rishi, country manager, American Express: "Why worry about the economic downturn? The market for plastic money has never suffered and has been constantly growing"

Senior officials of the committee told SUNDAY that for the first time in the country, each bank would submit a list of defaulting customers which will be constantly updated to constitute the Negative List. All major international and nationalised banks have become membersof the special committee and agreed to share vital data that they have always considered sacrosanct. The committee will start its operation from May this year. •

Shantanu Guha Ray/New Delhi

DAMNING REPORT

The Srikrishna Commission on the 1992-93 Bombay riots nails several politicians

Ever since Justice B.N. Srikrishna's secretary handed over the 700-page two-volume document to chief secretary (home) P. Subramaniam on 16 February, the Shiv Sena-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition government in Maharashtra is scurrying for cover. And if the Opposition parties are to be believed, the government's 'remote control' and the Shiv Sena supremo, Bal Thackeray's recent announcement to take temporary *sanyas* from active politics has been largely motivated by the damning commission report.

The voluminous Srikrishna Commission report, submitted after five years of probe into the Bombay riots of 1992-93, is said to contain several damning evidence against the ruling reginte. Submitted just before the 1998 Lok Sabha elections, the Shiv Sena-BJP regime made all the right noises about taking action on the report. But that was only for public consumption.

On 27 March, Maharashtra chief minister Manohar Joshi's statement in the Assembly, however, indicated that the state government was dithering to table the report during the ongoing Budget session of the Assembly. In his speech, Joshi told the House that considering the sensitive nature of the report, he is following the advice of the state law department. And as per the law department's recommendation, Joshi has set up a seven-member committee, headed by the state chief secretary, to look into the report submitted by Justice Srikrishna. At no cost, government sources say, Joshi wants to kick up a controversy and incite another communal riot in the city.

The chief minister told the House that the state advocate-general, C.J. Sawant, has told that the Srikrishna report should be tabled within six weeks of its being submitted to the government. The advocate-general also opined that the report should be placed along with the Action Taken Report (ATR) as per Section 3(4) of the Commission of Inquiry Act, 1952.

Amidst uproar in the Opposition benches, Joshi declared that the seven-member committee is expected to submit its report by 20 April. Then, the Cabinet will discuss the findings of committee and decide on whether it is possible to table the report during this session.

Much to chief minister Manohar Joshi's discomfort, the Srikrishna Commission report on the Bombay riots contains several damning evidence

No wonder, the government's attitude drew criticism from all quarters. And recently, the Bombay High Court — in its hearing of the writ petition filed by several NGOs for the immediate publication of the Srikrishna report — severely condemned the government's contradictory pre-poll statements, saying they were made only to appease the electorate.

Earlier, the state government had also refused an extension to the Srikrishna Commission when its three-year term came to an end. However, it was revived in May 1996 by the 13-day BJP government at the Centre. Perhaps, the government feared that unless done, the BJP-Shiv Sena regime would face problems under the United Front government that

replaced the BJP at the Centre.

According to reliable sources, with several damning depositions made before the Srikrishna Commission, the Shiv Sena and the Sangh Parivar — Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, and the RashtriyaSwayamsevakSangh — have come in for severe flak for inciting the communal carnage in Bombay in 1992.

In his deposition before the commission, former chief minister Sudhakarrao Naik confessed that "communal tension was rising in Bombay due to various activities — like *Rampaduka poojan, Chowk Sabhas* and recruitment of *kar sevaks* — undertaken by the Hindutva parties".

Sources claim that *maha artis* conducted during communal riots find a special mention in the report. "It became obvious through several depositions that communal parties had vested interest by organising *ghantanaads* and *maha artis*. The intention was to keep up the communal tension," informed a senior counsel.

Moreover, former CM Naik admitted that "*maha artis* were abused by some organisers on some occasions for non-

WATCH OUT!

Politicians likely to be indicted

Bal Thackeray, Shiv Sena chief

For his inflammatory editorials and articles in Sena's mouthpiece *Saamna* during the communal riots. His publication continued to print inflammatory articles despite warnings from the police department.

In his interview to *Time* magazine in January 1993, he said that all anti-national members of the minority community should be kicked out of the country.

Moreover, Yuvraj Mohite, a journalist with *Mahanagar*, deposed before the commission that on his visit to Bal Thackeray's residence on 8 January, 1993, alongwith the then mayor, Chandrakant Handore, the Sena chief was heard exhorting several phone callers to kill minority community members.

Sudhakarrao Naik, former CM

Although the communal riots broke out in Bombay on 6 December, 1992, Naik reached Bombay two days later from Nagpur — where he was attending the Assembly session. The state government took no steps to ease the tension in the city. However, Naik admitted before the commission that he was aware of the rising communal tension in the city from or about September 1992.

Manohar Joshi, CM Maharashtra

For organising and participating in *maha artis*, which triggered incidents of violence in his own constituency — Dadar.

Joshi, apparently, left Bombay with a group of Shiv Sainiks for *kar seva* in Ayodhya just before the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December, 1992. However, it is different matter that their plane developed a technical snag on the way and never made it on time.

Sharad Pawar, Leader of the Opposition, Lok Sabha

For making no attempts to prosecute Bal Thackeray after succeeding Sudhakarrao Naik as chief minister of Maharashtra in March 1993, on the four criminal charges registered against him during the Bombay riots.

Madhukar Sarpotdar, MP

For his incendiary speech on 12 January, 1993, outside a police station in his constituency. He told the gathering not to leave a single Muslim house intact. Result: innocent Muslims were killed, houses looted and burnt. •

religious purposes." Jambunathan Srinivas Iyer, the former additional chief secretary (home), too, stated that "the Shiv Sena had in a big way taken upon itself the task of organising *maha artis* in the city. And in certain areas, the *artis* resulted in the flaring up of communal tension and violence".

Chief minister Manohar Joshi, too, admitted that the "Shiv Sena's concept of *kar seva* was not confined only to singing *bhajans* and *kirtans* with musical instruments, but to go one step further and clean the premises of the Shilanyas. And that Bal Thackeray had given a green signal of this kind to 500-odd Shiv Saniks who were on their way to Ayodhya"

Deposing before the commission, Jambunath Iyer said that after the riots began in Bombay on 6 December, communal parties like the Shiv Sena, VHP, and Bajrang Dal made "communally inciting speeches and displayed provocative material on blackboards and placards".

However, the Sena MP Madhukar Sarpotdar's was the most damning testimony. Before the commission, he justified his party's use of "retaliatory violence". When asked whether he justified the killing of innocent Muslims in Colaba in retaliation to the killing of Hindus in suburban Jogeshwari, Sarpotdar reiterated that it was "natural and justified" and a "party policy".

Justice B.N. Srikrisnna: raising a storm

Joshi (left) and Thackeray: caught on the wrong foot

The Srikrishna Commission has rapped the previous Congress government in Maharashtra, too, for its apparent inaction in stemming the violence that killed about 2,000 people. In one of his exclusive interviews, Justice Srikrishna is reported to have said: "If somebody can take action to stop communal riots and does not, it becomes a question of abdicating responsibility. That's equally reprehensible. The consequences of such abdication are visible. The debate cannot be on whether this is a crime, but on what ought to have been done to save lives and why this was not done?"

Justice Srikrishna is also believed to have dwelt at length on the Shiv Sena-BJP government's caginess in exhibiting the "Thackeray files" — containing official reasons for withdrawal of four riots-related cases against Bal Thackeray — before the Commission. The cases against Thackeray were withdrawn in 1995 "in the interest of justice" after a Shiv Sena leader, Kiran Wadivkar, requested deputy chief minister, Gopinath Munde, who also holds the home portfolio, to prove his "love for the country".

Apparently, on 2 January 1993, the police department had warned *Saamna* to stop publishing inflammatory articles and editorials. But in spite of the warning, *Saamna*, which is edited by Thackeray himself, published such articles on 10, 11, 12, and 21 January. Subsequently, the then Commissioner of Police, A.S. Samra, sought formal permission from the state government to prosecute Thackeray. Samra even stated in his report that there were enough evidence to prosecute Thackeray under Section 153 of the IPC.

Interestingly, Justice Srikrishna is believed to have established a link between the worst-ever communal riots to rock Bombay in 1992-93 and the serial bomb blasts in the city soon thereafter. His comment on this issue, in a recent interview in Communalism Combat, is quite revealing. Asked whether there was any similarity between the recent Coimbatore bomb blasts and the bomb blasts in Bombay, Justice Srikrishna replied: "Isn't it awful how we refuse to learn. Take a situation in any family. There is a younger brother who I beat again and again till he is pushed to the corner. So much so that he is pushed against the wall. A point is reached when he can't and won't take any more. He rebels and then he takes the help of any outsider to get back at me."

So come 20 April, and the clock will start ticking for Manohar Joshi and his Cabinet colleagues. They will have to act fast, because the Opposition is mounting pressure and the people of Maharashtra are waiting with bated breath to know about the findings of the Commission. •

Kanjal Walia/Bombay

Why is Thackeray angry with Joshi (left)? Some say the Sena chief couldn't digest his party's poll debacle and found an easy scapegoat in the chief minister

HARD TIMES

Maharashtra chief minister Manohar Joshi is a troubled man

Things have never looked so bleak for Manohar Joshi. His political mentor and Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray is angry with him. His enemies within the party are out to trip him and Opposition leaders are bringing corruption charges against him and his family. Joshi is clearly in the midst of his worst political crisis.

One example of his plummeting credibility is that Sena circles are already abuzz with names of possible 'successors'. There's talk of Thackeray pitchforking either revenue minister Narayan Rane or the Sena MP from Ahmednagar, Balasaheb Vikhe Patil, into the chief minister's chair after the current Assembly session ends on 22 April. Even the names of Uddhav, Thackeray's son, and nephew Raj Thackeray are not being ruled out.

Joshi's self-confessed "unlucky stars" showed their malignant prowess just days after the Sena-BJP government completed three years in office on 14 March when Thackeray, through his party mouthpiece *Saamna*, hauled him up for his alleged affinity with Sharad Pawar. "If Joshi has pro-Pawar leanings, then he will have to pay a heavy price for it," fumed Thackeray. "I will certainly have to think about my chief minister." An undisguised threat, it was only after a lot of drama that Thackeray was persuaded to persist — for the moment at least — with Joshi as chief minister.

Thackeray also slammed Joshi and his son Unmesh for their links with builder Raj Dadarkar who, alleged insiders, was collecting money from every major builder for getting projects cleared at the highest levels. In the *Saamna* interview, Thackeray noted that Joshi, who had earlier denied knowing the builder, acknowledged the link after Congress MLA R.R. Patil waved copies of Dadarkar's mobile phone bills in the Assembly. "Every other day he had made three-four calls to Unmesh, the chief minister and the secretary of the urban development department," said Patil to the chief minister's obvious discomfiture.

But why is Bal Thackeray suddenly angry with Manohar Joshi? Several theories have come up to explain the 'tiger's' roar. One theory, and the most likely, is that the Sena chief was unable to digest his party's recent debacle in the general elections and found an easy scapegoat in the chief minister. The Shiv Sena could only manage six of Maharashtra's 48 Lok Sabha seats. Another perception is that by cornering the CM, Thackeray wanted to send a message to all and sundry about who calls the shots in the government. Yet another theory conjectures that Thackeray's recent salvo was to counter the CM's subtle style of deflecting both the blame for the poll disaster and corruption charges towards his mentor's family.

In keeping with his run of "bad luck", Joshi also came in for a frontal attack

from Opposition leaders. Chaggan Bhujbal, leader of the Opposition in the state Assembly, alleged that Joshi's builder-friends Dadarkar and Shantilal Maru had forced the closure of eight schools in Dadar so that the buildings could be converted into commercial establishments.

Even party colleague and former agriculture minister Shashikant Sutar was unsparing. Out to avenge his humiliating ouster from the Cabinet last year on corruption charges, Sutar focused his wrath on the cornered CM. "You were quick to strip my portfolio and order an enquiry against me. Now justice demands that the allegations of corruption levelled by Thackeray and others against you should also be probed," he said in the ongoing session.

"If Joshi has pro-Pawar leanings, then he'll have to pay a heavy price for it," said Thackeray. "I will have to think about my chief minister"

The charges continued. "Joshi's only distinct achievement has been to keep the alliance afloat by mastering the tightrope walk between the BJP, the three 'remote controls' [Bal Thackeray, Raj and Uddhav], and a host of disgruntled Independents," said a senior Sena leader. "Otherwise, his government has completely strayed from the promises that set the saffron flag fluttering three years ago."

It was the government's volte-face on the Enron issue that was really the beginning of the disillusionment that set in among the party rank and file, probably one of the reasons why the Sena faltered when it mattered most. Let alone dumping the project into the Arabian Sea as it had promised, the administration went as far as declaring that it had no evidence of corruption in the project's clearance. Quite a turnaround, considering that corruption was *the* plank on which the Sena-BJP combine fought the Congress in the 1995 polls. They had, to extract maximum mileage, even gone to the extent of accusing the Pawar government of deliberately distorting the power scene in the state. Thackeray and his brood had then ribbed the Pawar-led Congress saying that it had painted an alarming picture of impending power crisis to get the deal through.

Now the Bombay High Court's verdict has come as a slap in the face for Joshi's government. Translated in layman's terms, the verdict criticised the Joshi government for taking the people for a ride because there was no evidence to suggest corruption in the Enron deal.

From contentious power plants to riot probes. The administration's decision to scrap the Srikrishna Commission probing the 1992-93 riots was the next one to run into a bit of a rough. Rather than facing the prospect of Thackeray being summoned for deposition just before the 1996 Lok Sabha polls, the state government refused an extension to the commission. It was revived in May 1996. Even now the government is reluctant to make the report public.

Back in 1996, another decision of the government had rubbed BJP hardliners the wrong way. The occasion was a

BALANCE-SHEET

The Enron site and Gulshan Kumar's murder: blots on the administration

Michael Jackson concert which got the government's go-ahead despite its professed opposition to what it calls 'cultural imperialism'. The government backed the pop concert — only to enrich its coffers by about Rs four crore. Of course, the official reason given was that the money collected would be for the Raj Thackeray-floated Shiv Udoyg Sena to meet the growing challenge of unemployment. The scheme is yet to see daylight.

Given the circumstances, Joshi is predictably a much-reviled man. But in the world of politics, every man — especially someone who has risen from anonymity to fame — has his supporters. Joshi's supporters point out that the CM is handicapped because it's the 'remote control' who takes major decisions. The chief minister is nothing more than an errand boy. "The government had cancelled its agreement with Enron soon after it came to power, only to retract its stand and renegotiate the project at the behest of the Sena chief," informed a party leader.

There's a point in that, because if one remembers correctly, Enron CEO Rebecca Mark had met Thackeray while delaying her appointment with the chief minister. Then, Thackeray's public statements defending bomb blast accused Sanjay Dutt and pressing for his release also embarrassed Joshi.

But where the Sena slipped up badly was its inability to tackle corruption — the issue that had propelled it to power. Even Joshi, in a recent interview, rued that his government had not been able to weed out corruption. Extortions and blackmail have become the norm and the targets are mainly businessmen and traders. Clearly, quite a comedown from that impressive image of a government being sworn in in their office at Shivaji Park before the masses who had voted them to power rather than within the confines of Raj Bhavan.

So is it the end of the road for the chief minister? It's a bit too early in the day to make that kind of sweeping statement. Of course, a lot depends on how Joshi chooses to act. He is wily and resourceful and, if what his friends say is true, has strong survival instincts. Plus, he has one big advantage: he is Thackeray's best bet in holding the Pawar-rejuvenated Congress at bay for the next two years when the state goes to polls in 2000 AD. •

Kanjal Walia/Bombay

MAJ. GEN. ASHOK K. MEHTA

Subject to subjugation...

How the bureaucracy makes the armed forces submit

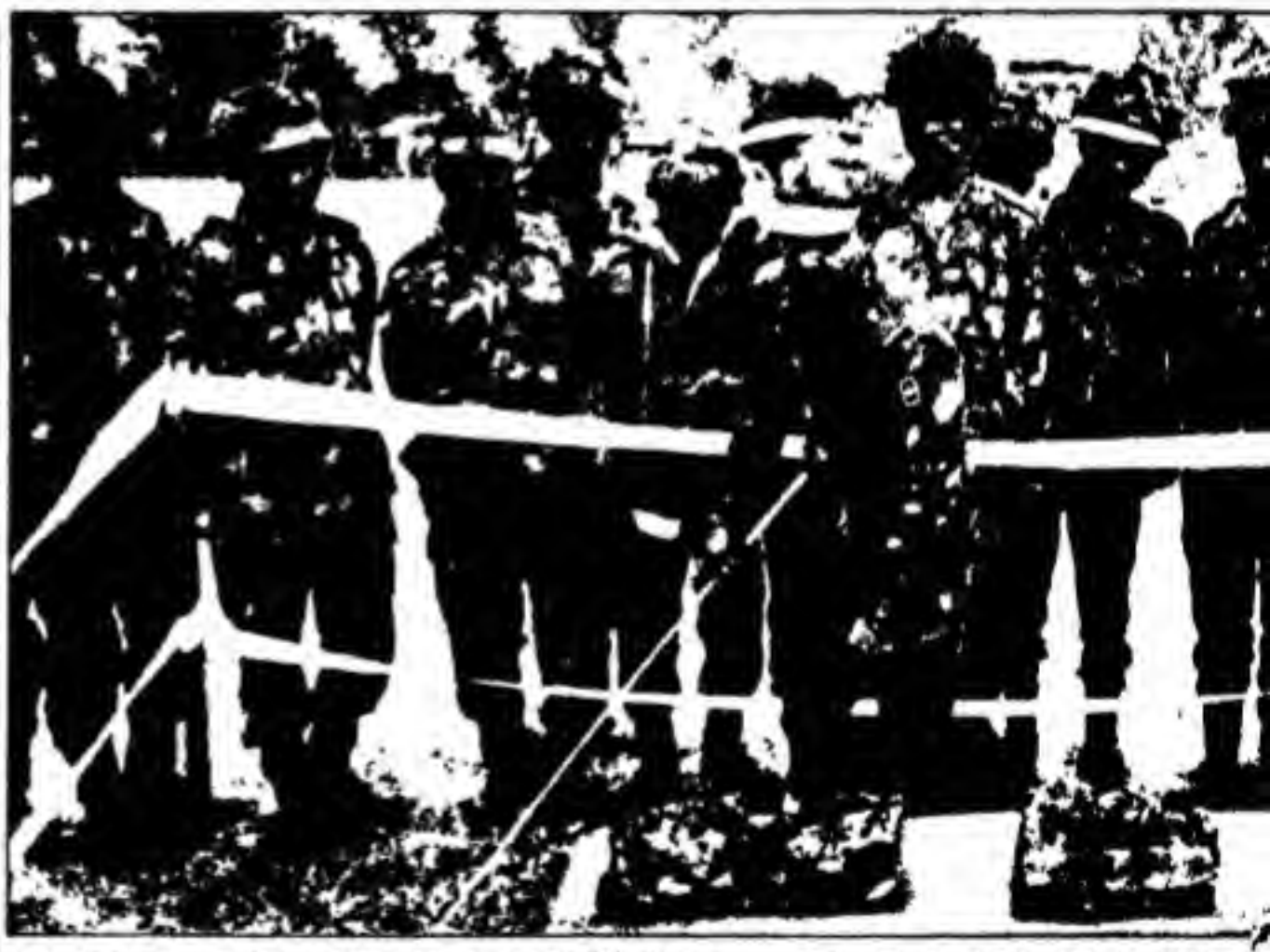
In its election manifesto on national security, the BJP has made a passing reference about past governments in 'ignoring the armed forces in defence planning' and the disillusionment and loss of morale among troops due to 'misguided bureaucratic interference'. Even this much acknowledgement, for the first time ever, by any party is welcome. Especially, the broadside at the bureaucracy.

But behind these admissions is the bigger sin of general apathy of politicians to the armed forces and their failure to appreciate the import of military power.

The history of uneasy civil-military relations in the subcontinent goes back to the reign of Queen Victoria, the replacement by the Crown of the East India Company and the promulgation of the Government of India Act 1868. Even at that time, the Secretary of State in London would worry about the Governor General/Victory in India staging a coup. Therefore, the C-in-C was made answerable to London and invariably in conflict with the Viceroy.

The Curzon-Kitchener dispute epitomised the turf battles for civilian control over the armed services. As C-in-C, Kitchener insisted he be the single point of advice for the government and for greater efficiency have financial control over defence spending. On the other hand, the Viceroy was determined to include a civilian member — the forbears of the present financial adviser (defence services) [FA (DS)].

The impasse was broken by Curzon resigning but London did not give in to Kitchener's demand. In 1947, when the post of the C-in-C was abolished, the air force and naval chiefs became co-equals with the army chief. The job of inter-service coordination and cooperation done by the C-in-C was usurped by the MoD. Not only did it compartmentalise the civil and military but also arrogated all authority without any responsibility.



Also, an unfounded fear of a military takeover resulted in an alliance between politicians and bureaucrats. The rest is recent history and the cause of the present disarray in the management of national security and defence.

The strategic alliance to down the armed forces began with an assault on their warrant of Precedence, reducing in the eyes of society, the *izzat* and *iqbal* of persons in uniform. That is not all. The MoD relegated the services to a subordinate position in a number of other areas, previously the prerogative of the army.

When it comes to financial control both North and South Blocks strangulate the services for funds. In his first presentation to defence minister George Fernandes, army chief, Gen. Ved Malik flashed four slides on this perpetual dilemma. The first slide read: The COAS is responsible for the operational preparedness of the army. But he has no say in the procurement of military hardware. Another said: There is no money, even the limited amount allotted (this year Rs 431 crore for modernisation) cannot be utilised because of cumbersome procurement procedures made by the bureaucracy. The last line was telling: Net effect — there is no money. Therefore, this year was a total wash out for modernisation.

The biggest shame of 50 years of Independence is that bureaucrats have not even spared the welfare funds of soldiers, sailors and airmen. Later this month, the defence services canteen stores will celebrate 50 years. A bit of history here: the canteen was set-up mainly for the British troops in the belief at the time that all Indian soldiers needed were *bidis*, matches, soap, sesame oil, blanco

and boot polish.

In 1977, canteen funds, generated entirely through sales to serving and retired servicemen, were deviously merged with the Consolidated Fund of India with a commitment by government that these funds meant for the welfare and amenities of troops would be augmented and armed forces need have no anxiety over the merger. The bottomline was: profits would be ploughed back for troops' welfare.

In the late Eighties, government ruled that services would get minimum of 50 per cent and maximum of 80 per cent of

the profits. Conveniently, only the minimum limit has been promulgated. A request for increasing this to 70 per cent has been on file for the last three years. There is an equally strong case for unit-run canteens to receive an increased qualitative discount, but MoD will not oblige. Instead of helping troops, it has been distributing their profits to the general public.

In 1996, Rs 5 crore went missing from profit funds. It was diverted to a non-service institution which is yet to see the light of day. An in-house enquiry to investigate this illegal transaction has been instituted. Most probably, the society where the money has allegedly gone, does not exist.

One other irregularity is about Rum contracts. This is controlled entirely by MoD. Rum, as everyone knows, is liquid gold for soldiers and an accepted elixir for morale. Until the late Eighties, soldiers were given free issue of Rum in incongenial environment. Nowadays, they are given a cash allowance instead. Rum contract is about inducting the cheapest — three month old unmatured Rum (popularly called *ghoda* Rum) — through tenders controlled by the ministry. Troops' preference, quality, etc.,

In his presentation to defence minister George Fernandes (above), army chief Gen. Malik pointed out that the COAS has no say in the procurement of military hardware and that the money allotted cannot be utilised because of cumbersome procurement procedures

are given the go by. Of the 20 distilleries involved in its supply, under Mulayam Singh Yadav's ministership, at least 10 of these distilleries were UP-based.

How does the MoD manage to get away with such high-handedness in manipulation of funds and award of contracts? The answer is in two words: civilian control. This control is spread both at policy and executive levels. First is the Board of Control — which seldom meets — is headed by the Raksha Mantri and his deputy, but in name only. The real power is exercised by defence secretary and FA(DS) though like them, the Quarter Master General (QMG) and his counterparts in the other services are equal members on paper at least.

It is in the composition of the executive committee that the MoD has bowled the googly by appointing its additional secretary, who is not even a member of the board, as chairman. (He was deviously elevated to this post two years ago). Its members are Quarter Master General (who is also on the board) and an additional FA(DS). This is a travesty of protocol and procedure. A lieutenant-general figures 22nd on the protocol list against an additional secretary who is one below. Yet, he has been made the chairman over the head of the QMG. This is the MoD's method of embarrassing a general.

Such excesses committed by the MoD against its own services on the issue of their welfare and amenities fund is deplorable. It is a great shame the armed forces have allowed things to come to such a pass. Yet, the canteens department has grown from a turnover of Rs 48 lakh in 1948 to over Rs 2,000 crore, recording annually profits ranging between Rs 80 to 90 crore meant for welfare of troops.

The comprehensive and systematic dimunition of the defence services by the bureaucracy has to be stopped. And as promised by the new BJP government in its election manifesto, their *izzat* and *iqbal* restored commensurate with their job of defending the integrity of the country. For all its excesses against the armed forces, there is a demand by them to rename the MoD as Ministry of Offence. •

(The author was a general officer commanding of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force in southern Sri Lanka. He is also a founder member of the Defence Planning Staff of the Chiefs of Staff Committee)

The Great Indian

The air force spends Rs 150 crore to tell the country what everyone already knows: that the futuristic Su-30 is a good aircraft. But is that enough?

Now that the dust raised by the Indian Air Force's (IAF) fire power demonstration (Vayu Shakti 1998) has not settled over the Pokharan ranges and has been used as an obscurant on the media to hide its sins about the Sukhoi and the unrest in the IAF, it is time to tell the real story. With complete respect for fellow journalists, it has to be said they can be taken for a ride on matters military very easily. For them, there is no difference between officers and airmen, rifles and rockets, army and BSF. They are *jawans* and guns from the military.

So they went to town on the Sukhoi — Su-30 — it stole the show at Pokharan. To understand why this, in the words of a "retired air marshal, this *shosha* (ritual) was necessary, the reader will need to recall the four-part SUNDAY serial on the Su-30 beginning 1-7 February and continuing till 1-7 March this year.

The gist was:

- The Su-30 was not part of IAF's long term re-equipment plan.

- Former chief of air staff (COAS) S.K. Kaul had said the aircraft was not relevant to IAF's strategic doctrine and Russian product support was highly unreliable.

- In its present form, Su-30 was non-operational. There were no hard points and the weapons-mix had not been contracted for though existing weapons were inter-operable. The complicated upgradation plan and the high life-cycle costs reflected the enormous gap between desired and demonstrated capabilities as the air show has revealed.

- Short-circuiting procurement procedures, making hasty advance payments without formal contracts and huge kickbacks.

The fire power demonstration at Pokharan. Seated L to R: Air Marshal S. Krishnaswamy, Air Chief Marshal S.K. Sareen and Aruna Sareen: 'benefit show'

This article will deal mainly with the present operational capability of Su-30. The first eight aircraft arrived in June 1997. Till March 1998, the IAF studiously avoided showing the bellyface of the Su-30 on which weapons are fixed. It is only after the SUNDAY Sukhoi serial that the first pictures showing weapon platforms (hard points) were published in newspapers during the visit of the French defence chief to Pune where the aircraft are located. Two weeks later, air headquarters sent additional pictures to SUNDAY highlighting the weapons platforms.

On 6 March, *The Indian Express* reported that the SUNDAY story about no hard points had alerted the Su-30 unit in Pune, who wrote to the air headquarters that adapters be attached to the pylons were not contracted for in the Indo-Russian deal. Somehow, this 'lost' equipment was found and fitted. The government then issued a rebuttal to the SUNDAY report. All this at a time when the

Rope Trick

unrest in the IAF was at its peak and the President had already summoned the chief of air staff for an explanation

It was then that the decision to include the Su-30 in the fire power demo held last month was taken. And the publicity blitzkrieg was launched to extol the operational capability and agility of the Su-30.

The IAF is raving over an aircraft which is yet to be developed and may take eight to ten years to do so. The aircraft it has today is a twin-seat advanced trainer, an interceptor capable of dropping bombs, not the multi-role version which can fire precision-guided weapons India has paid for. There was much song and dance about Vayu Shakti at Pokharan on 21 March. Sareen had hoped he could show the new defence minister, George Fernandes, that his air force was shipshape and the Su-30 as good as the Russians can make it.

Friends of Sareen called it his 'Benefit Show,' others the 'royal command performance'. In the past, such demonstrations were held annually at the Tilpat ranges in Delhi. Officers of the three services on training courses throughout the country, along with a galaxy of diplomats, military attaches, civil servants and politicians used to attend. Since the early Eighties, because of the expanding townships east of the Jamuna and the escalating cost of such shows, the first fire-power demonstration held after more than a decade was at the Pokharan ranges in 1995. Having such shows on an annual basis is unusual, if not unprecedented. But Sareen had to make the point that the air force was in good heart — great camaraderie existed between the fighter pilots and technical personnel and the Su-30 had fangs.

So what was so great about this demonstration? It was "the first public demonstration of the operational capabilities of Su-30, the air superiority fighter inducted into IAF's service just nine months ago to be shown in both air superiority and ground target demolition roles", according to the IAF's handout.

Listed at serial 10 in the sequence of events, three Su-30s attacked a simulated runway with 12 x 250 kg bombs each. Since these conventional 250 kg freefall (dumb) bombs cannot put a runway out of action, four Jaguars which are dedicated ground attack fighters were employed with runway penetration bombs to complete the job. Later, the same Su-30s returned and jinked around in mock combat with MiG-29s creating the inspired mathematical equation: 2 x Su-30 = 4 x MiG-29s!

What the Su-30 had done was merely drop the bombs over the target. In real life, the Rs 150-crore-a-piece fighter ought never to be used for dropping such World War II vintage bombs (which were what the Hurricanes used) but instead be equipped with beyond visual range smart ordinance, precision-guided TV or radar or laser means to their specific targets. "This job of dropping bombs could have been done by a Rs 5-crore helicopter or a Rs 20-crore Kiran trainer," remarked an air marshal.

The demonstrated capability of Su-30 last month proves the aircraft is not fully operational, and not the least capable of joining the IAF order of battle. It does not have the appropriate weapons-and-avionics mix to prove its mettle in its present version of an air defence interceptor, leave alone the multi-role version.

Three recently retired air marshals — Denzil Keelor, R.S. Bedi and M.S. Wollen — among others are on record, condemning the purchase of the aircraft and the convoluted deal with its complex delivery schedule and a sophisticated package of kickbacks. None of them, including SUNDAY, has said the Su-30 is not a good aircraft. It is just a bad deal.

In order to douse the so-called 'uninformed criticism' of the operational capability of the Su-30, the IAF showcased 62 aircraft of the IAF representing some 25 percent of its combat inventory. On a conservative estimate, taking just the direct costs of fuel, maintenance and ordnance expended, the IAF would have spent nearly Rs 150 crore on this demonstration. After the show, Sareen said the weapons used were from the 'old stocks'. The real stuff is for the enemy, he said. The enemy, Dear Sir, is somewhere else. •

Major-Gen Ashok K. Mehta

V. GANGADHAR

Saffron-st

The media seem to be too obsessed with the BJP to realise the dangers stalking the party

Who is saving democracy and secularism in India? Who keeps in check the Congress authoritarianism? Who holds the delicate balance of power in his hands? Going by media reports, it is Chandrababu Naidu, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) leader and chief minister of Andhra Pradesh.

How long can Naidu play this blind man's buff? The so-called 'convenor' of the United Front maintained he will keep 'equidistance' from the BJP and the Congress. He appealed to the media to understand his 'special' position: the Congress was the major enemy in his state, so how can he support a Congress government at the Centre?

The drama did not stop here. Even while claiming to be 'equi-distant', Naidu conspired with the BJP and projected his own partyman, Balayogi, to contest for the Speaker's post. The urbane, confident and impartial Sangma was displaced by a mumbling, ill-at-ease, greenhorn whose vocabulary consisted of just one word: "Pleeze... pleeze." Carrying the equidistance argument further, Naidu then supported the confidence motion in the Vajpayee government. But as the backlash of his actions was felt in his home-base, Naidu had to do a bit of rethinking. His party will not join the central government but give "issue-based support".

What is Naidu's favourite issue? Simple. To be in power in Andhra and play a major role in Delhi. Very few politicians, that too at the regional level, have played such a double role.

But why was this erstwhile UF star fighting shy of taking on the Congress in his state? The Congress holds power in very few states and is divided everywhere. If Naidu can speak so glibly on national issues and boast of his 'achieve-

George Fernandes: why is he so popular with journalists?

ruck

ments' in Andhra Pradesh, why was he so scared of accepting the Congress challenge in his home state?

VINOD MEHTA in *Outlook* broke the Naidu bubble. "Naidu has behaved disgracefully in the past few weeks. The manner in which he chose to ditch his colleagues in the United Front, the very colleagues who had enthusiastically pitched him onto national centre-stage was bad enough, but at least it had the fig leaf of party interest (not doing business with the Congress). His dubious conduct over the Speaker issue is indefensible. I mean no disrespect to G.M. Balayogi — he cuts a sorry figure in the elevated chair, a bit like the chicken waiting to be slaughtered — but where was the urgency or the necessity for Mr Naidu to get embroiled in the 12 o'clock deadline charade in Parliament? All of which strongly suggests that Naidu's daily and loud declarations of neutrality were just a ruse to buy time and secure the best possible deal for himself and the TDP."

Unfortunately, the media were full of saffron-struck stars who saw nothing wrong in the shady deals of the *sangh parivar*. Take the case of one of the saffron brigade scribes, T.V.R. Shenoy. While his beloved BJP dropped its moral clothing faster than a Bollywood starlet, Shenoy was more concerned and a "little curious as to why Sonia Gandhi was suddenly so brazen in her quest for power". Will Congressmen continue to sing Sonia's praises once the facts of the Bofors scandal begin to come out?" Shenoy saab, the answer is simple: Why should Sonia Gandhi fear a BJP government which has been propped up by the likes of Sukh Ram, Jayalalitha and Chautala? The Rs 64-crore Bofors commission was a pittance compared to the amounts involved in the shady deals of the BJP allies.

ANOTHER GLARING media blind spot concerned the new defence minister, George Fernandes. I had always wondered why he was so popular with certain sections of the media. For years, the Bombay press front-paged photographs showing Fernandes trying to stop suburban trains, forcing millions of commuters to walk long distances. That was Fernandes' way of seeking popularity. But *The Asian Age* highlighted certain other disturbing trends. In an edit page article, Seema Mustafa rightly pointed out that Fernandes will have to go a long way to prove his credentials. "Not long ago, the gentleman organised a convention in the capital to support the banned LTTE outfit. Fernandes, showing complete disregard for the Indian government's position on this, went all out to endorse the LTTE propaganda."

What is Chandrababu Naidu's favourite issue? Simple. To be in power in Andhra and play a major role in Delhi. Very few politicians, that too at the regional level, have played such a double role

The same Fernandes, unfortunately, continues to be a demi-god for some our journalists. Day after day, his views on every subject on earth are front-paged in 'exclusive' interviews. He was supposed to be 'reluctant' to join the Cabinet. Then we were told he had insisted on the defence ministry. How can the 'reluctant' one make such demands? No journalist questioned his frequent and much-publicised meetings with foreign-based Sikh militants who were instigating their 'friends' in Punjab to kill hundreds of innocent Indians. How was the 'simple and clean' Fernandes able to go abroad so frequently and travel in style spreading goodwill and cheer among various militant outfits?

The very thought that the same man will now be privy to all our defence details and military secrets frightens me. Yet sections of the media were more concerned trying to prove that Sonia Gandhi was a 'foreigner.' Reading Seema Mustafa should open the eyes of the readers to the dangers we are facing. "Vajpayee is the mask for the hardliners who have presently gathered around him... It is a Cabinet of religious and regional fundamentalism. The two slogans raised at the oath-taking ceremony were, *'Bole so Nihal'* and *'Jai Sri Ram'* Mustafa wondered how the Prime Minister would control Advaniji at the home ministry, and the deadly combination of Murli Manohar Joshi and Uma Bharti in the human resources development ministry. By quoting catchy couplets? •

Place in the sun

Tollygunge Agragami qualifies to play in the national league

Making it to the top ten is an achievement by any standard. For Tollygunge Agragami, it was akin to the little boy coming first in class after studying under a street lamp. But the latest entrant to the Philips National League, having made it to the premier competition sans money and crowd support, will have to tread warily to avoid the pitfalls that generally accompany euphoria-induced confidence.

For one, the club will have to either find a sponsor or float a company. This to get a firm economic footing and avoid the usual problems faced by clubs trying to cash in on a one-time grant from a benefactor. It is all right for a club like the recently-demoted Mahindra and Mahindra because it has the backing of a strong, multi-faceted company which has given it its name.

Should Tollygunge not have a strong financial base, it will slide into oblivion if it is relegated next season. It is, at the moment, negotiating with a couple of cash-rich companies which had earlier sought a tie-up with Mohun Bagan and East Bengal, but failed to do so.

With a background of struggle for half a century — the name had been changed from Rassa Agragami Samity to Tollygunge Agragami early on — the club will naturally try to prolong its newfound glory. And to oversee preparations for that, the club has at its helm the present joint-secretary of the Indian Football Association, Mantu Ghosh. The quiet, unassuming official has nurtured this club from its very inception.

Tollygunge Agragami, like most amateur clubs on the Calcutta Maidan, has always had to court its pennies. A membership fee of just Rs 30 a year is today bolstered by a life-membership roster of 240 people. Getting money to pay players has always been a problem, solved sometimes through individual contributions from the likes of Ghosh.

Financial difficulties faced by the club have, in the past, given rise to match-fixing allegations, but Tollygunge has stoutly denied these rumours. In fact, it is perhaps the first club in Calcutta to approve of a written resolution by its working committee to prevent match-fixing under any circumstances.

The club, which also has a cricket wing, has so far never had outside sponsorship of more than Rs 50,000 a year. Its success, too, has been limited to Calcutta. The best outstation result was the runners-up position at the Federation Cup in Cuttack.

But, in Calcutta, Tollygunge has always been the team to beat. Although often described as East Bengal's 'B' team because the majority of its members originally came from what is now Bangladesh, it has notched up victories against both Mohun Bagan and East Bengal and has always been a difficult proposition.

With its background, Tollygunge is now ideally placed to foster a new beginning in professional football. Not having a place of its own, the club could start building its infrastructure from scratch. It could set up its own club in the suburbs — in the Tollygunge area — where it could have a players' hostel and at least a practice if not a full-fledged ground of its own. The nurturing of a junior team with boarding facilities should be the next step.

If the club can find resources for such a venture, it would not only ensure a long stay at the top but act as a model for several other clubs to develop their footballing acumen.

One hopes Tollygunge would look towards a permanent fund-flowing situation rather than a one-time windfall which could ensure the recruitment of good players. For, without a solid foundation, the club could quite easily slip back into mediocrity. •

Arijit Sen/Calcutta

Tollygunge Agragami playing in Calcutta: a new beginning

All those who thought — and there couldn't have been many — that Sushmita Sen and Vikram Bhatt would live happily ever after, had better think again. The couple are said to be having regular and loud spats (to which their neighbours listen in with relish) both at home and in public. And now, Sen has begun making ominous statements like how she isn't sure that Vikram is the man that she will marry.

Poor Vikram. It can't be fun to be treated like this by a woman for whom you have left home and hearth. But then, who said that being in love was easy?

Earlier it was only Hindi film heroes who would hide the fact that they were married (and even had a child or two tucked away in the shadows) for fear that they would lose out on the love and affection of their (female) fans. But now, even heroines are following their lead. Raveena Tandon, for instance, still denies strenuously that she wed Akshay Kumar in a secret ceremony a couple of years ago. And even Miss Goody two-shoes Juhi Chawla is keeping her marriage to Jai Mehta under wraps — or so those in the know would have us believe.

Honestly, these women should take a leaf out of Shah Rukh Khan's book. The man makes no secret of the fact that he is besotted with his wife Gauri and new-born son, Arjun. And guess what? It makes absolutely no difference to his box-office appeal.

Mamta Kulkarni's career may not be going great guns, but she manages to feature in all the gossip columns.

The latest story involving her had it that Kulkarni had married fight director Tinnu Verma in a secret ceremony. Why secret, you ask? Well, that might have something to do with the fact that Verma was already a married man.

Verma, of course, strenuously denies the story. But while we may well believe him, does his (first) wife?

We guess it was too good to last. After months of silent suffering, Rahul Roy has finally gone public about the way he feels about his former fiancee, Suman Ranganathan. And rather than adopt a lofty forgive-and-forget attitude, Roy has let his bitterness show. He knew all along, he says now, that Suman was cheating on him. But he couldn't do anything about it because he was too much in love with her.

Now that they have gone their separate ways, however, Roy feels that he can finally tell it like it was.

But, frankly, is anyone listening? •

Atiya Amjad: her attempt became a blockbuster

VALUE ADDITION

A Hyderabad journalist puts together a stunning display of art from day-to-day objects

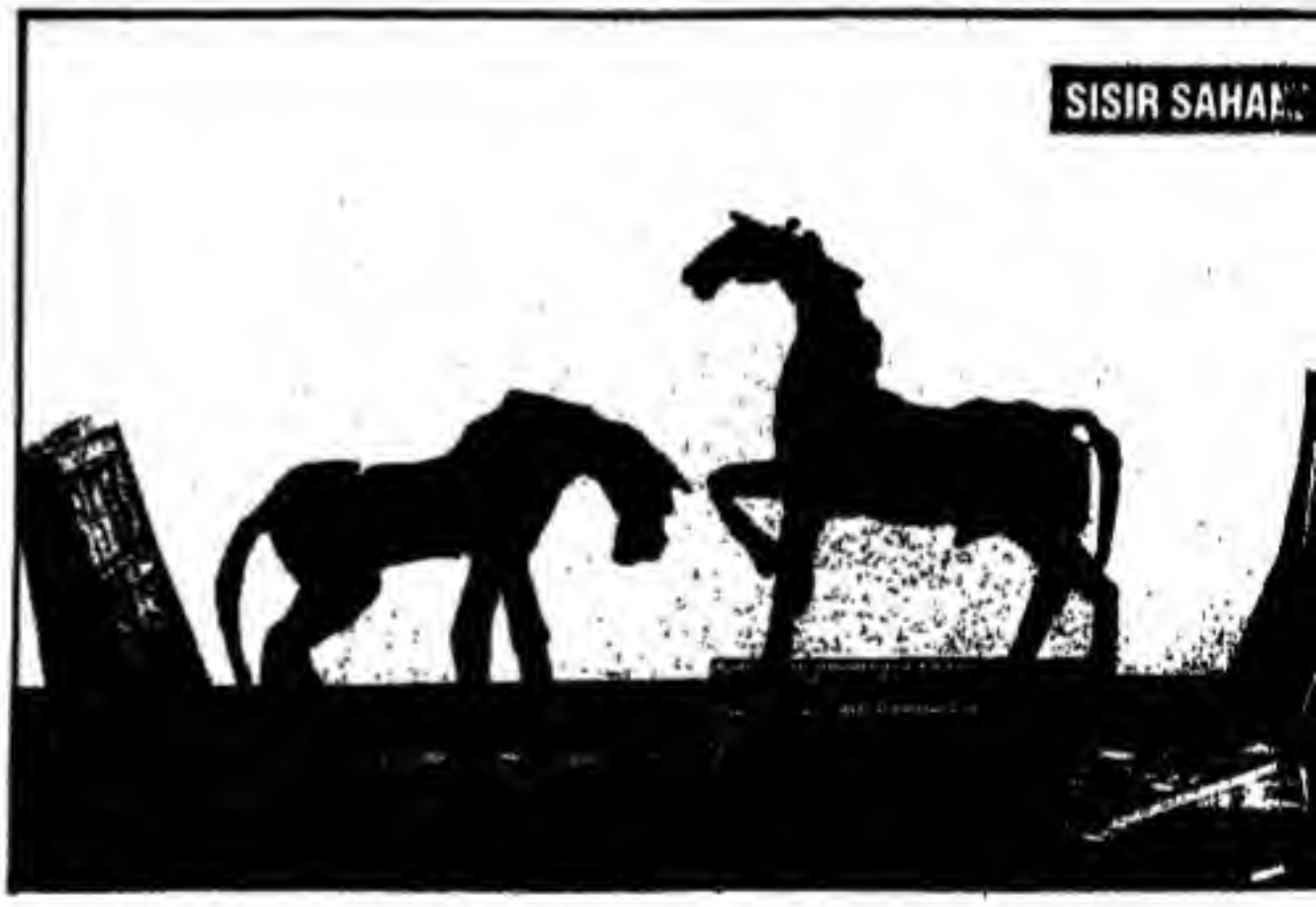
Call it another roadshow or a *rathyatra*. But the 'Art in Objects', a mobile exhibition launched in Hyderabad was just an attempt to project a different form of art promotion. According to the promoter, it aimed at popularising the love of art and celebrating the joy of artistic creation.

Atiya Amjad, coming from a family of art lovers of Hyderabad, did not know that her attempt would turn into such a blockbuster. "It is not a creation of the artists meant for broader canvas or immediate acquisition," she said. It was just a walking catalogue of the promising artists. Herself an artist, Atiya chose to be in the fourth estate by profession.

Junk art acquired a new meaning during the three-day exposition in the city last week. Twenty-four artists created specially for the exhibition some pieces of decoration from day-to-day objects. Described by Atiya as an attempt to reach out to a larger section of people who otherwise remained unintimidated by art, the exhibition which created raves in Hyderabad is soon to appear in Visakhapatnam, Calcutta and Mumbai with the help of some sponsors.

Although it appeared amateurish the collection caused a stir even in the official art circles in the city. Who couldn't be impressed by a ceramic WC with sitting tiles and a urinal converted into a fancy writing desk or a coffee table and a shelf converted into a fine dressing table with a mirror? "Many of them were just by-products in the studios of the artists.

SISIR SAHA...



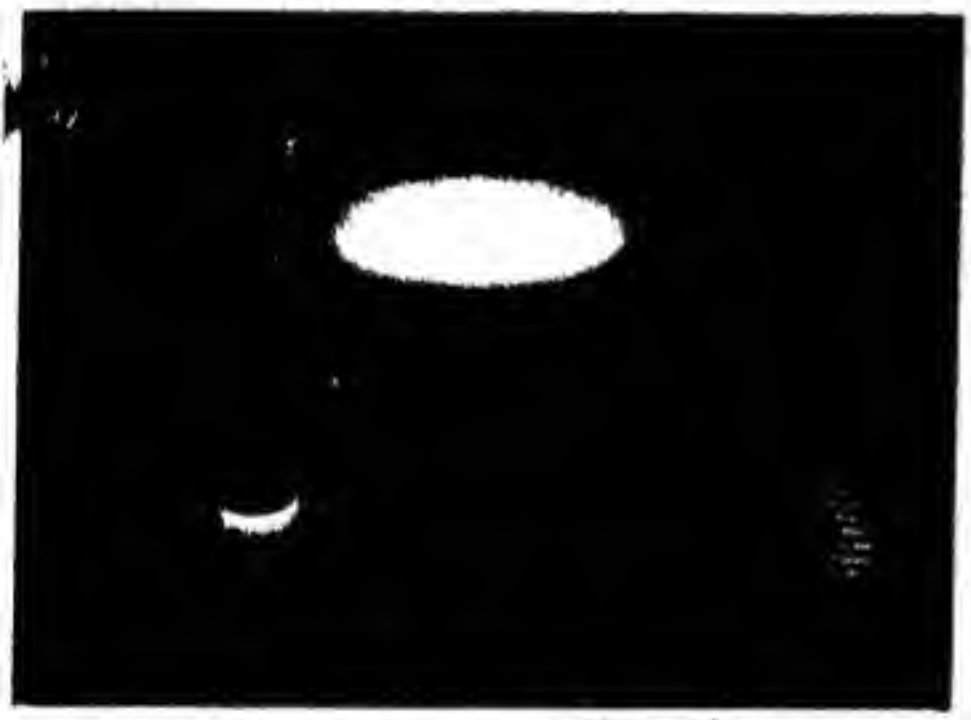
LAKSHAMANA MURTHY

The scrap of a bicycle formed a central magazine stand using the handle bars for legs and wheels for plates. Similarly, Sisir Sahana's metal horses turned out as bookends

They had created them for their convenience. But I thought these could be seen as useful or decorative pieces by the public," said Atiya.

Taking cue from the French artist Marcel Duchamp who made the most of day-to-day objects like urinals and water taps as his canvas, Atiya got her idea across to the local talents and convinced them to display their wares in the form of "functional art". It was a real surprise for lovers of Vaikuntham to find his work on a tea table or Sisir Sahana's metal horses turning out as bookends.

NEMIRAJ SHETTY



HAMID BIN AMAR

T. VAIKUNTHAM

SRINIVAS CHARI

The exhibition was described as a response of the contemporary artists to their environment. As a result a hatstand in Rajeswar Rao's house became an attraction with an owl perching on its head. The scrap of a bicycle formed a central magazine stand using the handle bars for legs and wheels for plates. Similarly old lamp-posts, clocks, screens and a decorative chair were on display and appreciated more as "functional art" rather than for their artistry.

"Most of these pieces have gone back to the respective studios of the artists. If anyone wanted them they would order directly or through me to the artists for whatever size and number they wanted," said Atiya. According to her, some of the ordinary things could acquire a different dimension just because of their proximity to the artists. "These things were ignored by the art customers but for the common man these could provide a decorative and fancy setting." That is how the exhibition came to be titled 'Art inObjects'.

Atiya feels that the days of maintaining or safe keeping of valued art pieces are gone and most patrons of art would love to have good paintings at their breakfast and dining tables without having to worry about it anymore. "You can as well have your coffee table or dining table created as a decorative piece from things commonly available around the house," she said. And the products are relatively cheaper, too.

Atiya spent around Rs 40,000 to have some of the artefacts made. "It is my rapport with the artists over years which helped me convince them to look for new canvases rather than the bracketed ones," she remarked. What seemed strange to her was the non-artistic attitude of the people of Hyderabad, which abounds in art "from the old and dilapidated *dewdis* of the Nizam era to the flora in the spacious Chiron palace complex".

For Atiya the roadshow of functional art has brought a fresh air of concepts. She has come a long way from writing booklets for children in Urdu and working as a journalist in a city eveninger. "I am just bringing the two elements of the art movement together — creator and buyer. But I am also paving a new path and bringing art closer to people. You need not buy a Van Gogh to be known as an art lover. Even a teapoy with Vaikuntham's colourful belle will make a lot of difference to your drawing room," she suggested. •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

UTTAR PRADESH

Happy homecoming

Atal Behari Vajpayee takes time off to spend a day in Lucknow

It was Lucknow's date with the PM. It was the Lucknow MP's date with his people. 29 March marked a happy homecoming for Atal Behari Vajpayee, the day after his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition won the vote of confidence in Parliament.

The high point of the Prime Minister's day-long visit was, of course, a public meeting in Begum Hazrat Mahal Park, where he was welcomed by enthusiastic crowds. Conch shells were blown, crackers burst, and slogans raised: "*Ujjwal Bharat ki karo taiyyari, aa gaye hain Atal Behari* (Get ready for a bright and prosperous India, as Atal Behari is here)." As two 'Sahara' helicopters showered rose petals on the park, tens of thousands of people rose to greet their leader.

"I have come to thank the people of Lucknow," announced Vajpayee. And, perhaps, to prove a point or two to Muzaffar Ali, his Samajwadi Party rival in Lucknow who had pegged his electoral campaign on "Vajpayee's neglect of Lucknow". The filmmaker-turned-political-aspirant had, during his door-to-door campaign, pleaded: "Do you want an MP who can understand your day-to-day problems or a PM who will be here only on flying visits to look at Lucknow from a distance?"

"Make me MP if you want to see me as PM," was Vajpayee's pre-poll line. The people of Lucknow had responded, helping the BJP's prime ministerial candidate win in style. So now, once the curtains had come down on the 'confidence' drama in Delhi, it was pay-back time for Lucknow's MP. Quite literally. For chief minister Kalyan Singh lost no time in announcing the allocation of a special grant of Rs 10 crore for "Lucknow's beautification", befitting a PM's constituency!

Addressing a public gathering, holding political parleys with partymen, listening to the grievances of the common people, checking out his government-allotted flat in the UP capital — it was all in a day's work for Vajpayee. At the multi-storeyed government colony in which he has his MP's flat, the 13th PM of India seemed perfectly at home. He even went to some flats, pressed the doorbell, and mixed freely with the residents who gathered to meet their illustrious neighbour.

But what took every onlooker by surprise was Atal Behari Vajpayee's emotional gesture towards an elderly woman who had been pushed aside by overzealous security personnel. "Please let me have a word with him," she was pleading with the cops, who were refusing to let her get close to the PM. "*Atal, ab tum itne bade aadmi ban gaye ho ki main tumse baat tak nahin kar sakti hoon* (You have become such a big man that I cannot even speak to you now)," she called out, from a distance.

Vajpayee responded immediately to the familiar voice. Breaking all security barriers, the PM strode towards the lady and hugged her affectionately. With tears in his eyes he said, "She has been like a real sister to me." As time stood still and all protocol was forgotten, the 71-year-old PM

RUPINDER SHARMA

THANK YOU, LUCKNOW: *Atal Behari Vajpayee*

DEEPAK DHAWAN

POLITICAL WILL: *Kalyan Singh*

spent a few moments with 'his sister' and assured her of all help, "whatever", "whenever".

Later, at a press conference, Vajpayee expressed his displeasure over the security measures "that cause inconvenience to the common people". "I will ask the home ministry to review security of all VIPs and I will be only too glad to cut down my own. In any case I will not allow any more harassment to be caused to the public on account of VIP movements," assured the Prime Minister.

Vajpayee also took the opportunity to spell out all that he had done for Lucknow even before he became PM: "I have shown that if an MP sincerely wants, he can still do a reasonable bit to improve his constituency with the Rs 1 crore fund at his command."

His close confidant and the state's housing and urban development minister Lalji Tandon, explained how the constituency fund had been utilised in improving the city's water-supply system, street lighting, repairing and widening of roads, and construction of *'raen baseras'* (ordinary rest-houses) in some of the local hospitals.

And with the UP chief minister announcing a largesse of Rs 10 crore, the ambitious schemes for the "overall beautification and development of Lucknow" are now expected to go into overdrive. An enthusiastic team of local officials, led by divisional commissioner Desh Deepak Verma, is raring to go. "With the political will and the keen interest being taken personally by both the urban development minister and the chief minister, I am confident of ensuring a coordinated effort at the departmental level to give Lucknow the look of a 21st century state capital," Verma told SUNDAY. •

Sharat Pradhan/Lucknow

BIHAR

The fall of Patna

Laloo loses his grip over the state capital

There is something seriously wrong in Lalooland. The scenes witnessed on the streets of Patna on 2 April, bore testimony to the fact. As jubilant Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) supporters engulfed the Bihar capital, members of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) went into hiding, and, maybe, mourning.

The reason was not hard to find: Patna, the bastion of former chief minister Laloo Prasad Yadav and his men, had just been lost, and won. The BJP candidate, C.P. Thakur, had trounced his RJD rival and sitting MP Ram Kripal Yadav by a margin of 52,606 votes in the Patna repoll. With this, the march of the saffron brigade had reached Laloo's doorstep.

"I secured the votes in Atal Behari Vajpayee's name," declared a triumphant C.P. Thakur, who had only recently been inducted into the BJP after he deserted the Congress. "There was a general feeling of disappointment among the people of Patna that the BJP could not get a clear majority in Parliament. So, they all supported me to help boost the BJP's tally in the Lok Sabha."

The vanquished RJD camp, of course, blamed it all on the poor turnout during the 30 March repoll. "A reign of terror was unleashed by the paramilitary forces, which prevented my poor brothers and sisters from coming out and casting their votes," thundered RJD chief Laloo Prasad Yadav from the confines of 1, Anne Marg, the CM's residence in Patna. "They even forced the voters to stamp on the lotus," alleged Laloo. Ram Kripal Yadav, who had been confident of scoring a hat-trick in Patna, echoed his leader's sentiments and accused the central forces of "booth-capturing" and "scaring away poor voters".

Patna went for a repoll after the elections for the Lok Sabha seat, held on 16 February, were declared "null and void" by the Election Commission (EC). This followed reports of gross irregularities: booth-capturing, large-scale rigging, and violence. The EC had also ordered the transfer of the DIG,

AFTER THE POLLS: *BJP leaders stage a* dharna *in Patna*

SANJAY KUMAR

VOTE OF NO-CONFIDENCE: *Laloo Prasad Yadav*

city SP, and the DM-cum-returning-officer of Patna parliamentary constituency.

To ensure "free and fair" polls this time round, 75 companies of paramilitary forces and 43 companies of Bihar Military Police (BMP) were deployed in Patna on the day of the repoll. While the central paramilitary forces were stationed at every booth, the BMP was patrolling the streets and checking all two-wheelers and four-wheelers. While "free and fair" polls were accomplished, there was a 45 per cent voter-turnout.

As Patna went to the polls resembling a war zone, the significance of the electoral battle was not lost on either army. A win for the RJD would boost its morale and give Laloo the chance to begin a fresh round of BJP-bashing; victory for the BJP would strengthen its claim that Laloo had maintained a grip over Patna through "rigging and bogus voting" and give a boost to its Laloo-Rabri-*hatao* campaign in Bihar.

So, commander-in-chief Laloo Yadav chalked out an elaborate strategy to keep the BJP forces at bay. He got the Janata Dal nominee, Mufti Mohammad Qasim, to retire from the contest on 19 March and, much to the consternation of the 'original' Dal, even extend his support to the RJD candidate (for which he has now been show-caused by his party). Samajwadi Party candidate Ajit Kumar, too, stepped down to help Ram Kripal Yadav's cause.

Laloo also got the former Patna West MLA, Ramanand Yadav, to back Ram Kripal Yadav. According to sources, Ramanand, a strongman in his own right, and Ram Kripal buried their differences after the Patna MP 'apologised' to the former MLA and put him in charge of electioneering in the Patna West Assembly segment. Laloo exhorted all his ministers to mobilise the support of their respective castes for Ram Kripal Yadav. Even Anand Mohan, Rashtriya Janata Party (RJP) MP from Sheohar pitched in.

Meanwhile, there were distinct noises of dissatisfaction emanating from the BJP camp in Patna. *"Candidate theek nahin hai,"* was the not-so-muted whisper even on the day of the polls. Local leaders just couldn't stop grumbling about how the party leadership had "forcibly imposed" a "bad candidate": C.P. Thakur, a '*dal-badloo*' (turncoat).

To add to the drama on 30 March, Sushil Kumar Modi, leader of the Opposition in the Bihar Assembly, and some of his men, were detained for the day by the district administration, for "disrupting the poll process". The BJP's Patna Central MLA reacted by staging a *satyagraha* in front of the DM-cum-returning-officer Pradeep Kumar's office the very next day, to protest his "illegal and arbitrary detention".

But all's well that ends well. By the morning of 2 April, it was all over bar the shouting and the official announcement. With Thakur opening up a healthy lead, Laloo and his men beat a hasty retreat, while the celebrations began in the BJP camp and continued late into the night. •

Naved Zahir/Patna

Right to work

Sex workers in West Bengal renew their struggle for social and legal identity

On 14 November last year, the Netaji Indoor Stadium in Calcutta hosted India's first-ever national convention of sex workers. The convention, which was organised by the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), had a one-point agenda: to do away with the implementation of Immoral Traffic Act (PITA).

The DMSC also had a charter [illegible] that would logically be conserved [illegible] PITA becomes ineffectual. This includes [illegible] work as work, decriminalisation of [illegible] boards of sex workers, and [illegible] enforcement machinery.

On 29 March, this year, there was [illegible] November convention, once again [illegible] Stadium. It was time to evaluate [illegible] from the [illegible] workers [illegible] conference.

The DMSC has set out to prove that sex workers have their own identity which needs to be safeguarded — legally and socially. "Our efforts have been a tremendous success," says Anima Banerjee, president, DMSC. "Today, more and more people are realising that we have become an integral part of society."

"Now, I can proudly say: 'I am a sex worker'," says Shikha Das, Agnes Geeta Dey: "Customers now treat us like human beings. Previously they thought that we were in this trade for our own pleasure. Now they realise that we are doing this for a living. Now, I just hope that we get legal recognition as 'workers', and get a 'status'."

A few weeks before the 29 March 'follow-up', there was a workshop, the first of its kind in India: sex workers making sex workers aware about the dangers of AIDS and telling them how to prevent contracting AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs). "Our sex workers (who are also members of the DMSC) have been trained by doctors and nurses," says Ashim Banerjee. These members were eventually reaching out to the district-level sex workers in West Bengal — through slide shows and discussions — who have been exposed to these kind of programmes [illegible] have also [illegible] the last year or [illegible] are being [illegible]

ANDHRA PRADESH

Minority matter

The resignation of a Muslim minister poses problems for the TDP leadership

Basheeruddin Babukhan, the major industries minister of Andhra Pradesh, must never have thought that he would grab the national headlines one day. The soft-spoken Muslim leader of Nizamabad seemed the least likely to create a sensation. But 29 March changed all that.

That Sunday afternoon, a day after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition won the vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha thanks largely to a helping hand from Andhra Pradesh chief minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, Babukhan sprang a suprise by announcing his resignation from the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) Cabinet.

The suddenness of the move and its political implications sent shock-waves through the corridors of power in Hyderabad. Babukhan made it clear that he was quitting in protest over the manner in which his chief minister had bailed out the BJP in Parliament.

Expressing anguish at the TDP leadership's modus operandi, Babukhan said: "Our religious leaders spoke from the pulpits for the TDP. But now everyone feels shocked and betrayed."

While Naidu was taken completely by surprise, he had been warned about the growing resentment in the minority ranks from the moment he began to lean towards the BJP in the fractured Lower House. Basheeruddin Babukhan and TDP general secretary Lal Jan Pasha were the first to tell the

A POINT TO PROVE: *Basheeruddin Babukhan*

chief minister about the "the unhappiness among their Muslim brethren". Pasha and Babukhan even aired their views at a party meeting. "Even though I am not a member of the TDP politburo and was not invited, I barged into the room and spoke my mind," said the major industries minister.

When Naidu realised that there was no way that Babukhan would withdraw his resignation, he forwarded it to the Governor. Some other junior leaders of the Minorities Cell in the TDP followed Babukhan's example and put in their papers. "I am receiving congratulations and thanks from all over the world!" said Babukhan, justifying his drastic decision.

But his move to resign from the ministry and not vacate his Assembly seat or quit his party membership was not supported by some Muslim political parties like the MBT and the MIM. Lal Jan Pasha and four TDP Muslim legislators — Rahman (Vishakhapatnam), Khaleel Khan (Cuddapah), Ziauddin

the sex workers' workshop in Calcutta

without any shame, that yes, I am a *vaishya*. I am what I am. And our *andolan* will go on — we will continue fighting for our rights."

But it's quite different once you move away from Calcutta and into the backwaters. Rita Mondal is from Bagherhat, cut off from the urban milieu: "There are a lot of things about which I was totally in the dark. Now I feel that I am much more aware of myself. But unfortunately, this kind of a thing happens only once. I sincerely hope that such committees and *samitis* are formed in the rural areas."

For the urban sex workers, of course, policemen are enemy number one. Says Mala Singh: "Do you actually believe that these policemen are capable of arresting criminals or murderers? All that they want to do is harass people. During raids, they swoop on us and our customers, take some money and let us go."

On 29 March, eminent journalists and writers like Bachhi Karkaria, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Ananya Chatterjee, Subir Bhaumik, etc. participated in a debate. The topic: 'Recognition Of Sex Work And Legalisation Of Trade Will Destabilise Society'. In the end, it was a collective endorsement of the fact that sex workers had every right to be a legitimate part of society.

A vote of confidence that

(Guntur) and Mohammed Farooq (Nandyal)—also chose not to back Babukhan's play. Some, in fact, came out in support of Naidu and his policies.

"It is for our good only that Naidu has supported the BJP government at the Centre. If any anti-minority policy is implemented by the BJP, the TDP will withdraw support immediately," said Dr Rahman.

Meanwhile, the TDP government has moved a Bill in the state Assembly to give more teeth to the Minorities Commission. It has also asked the Puttaswamy Commission to ascertain whether Muslims can be given backward class (BC) status. "This has been a long-standing demand of theirs," observes revenue minister Devender Gowd.

Muslims account for 8.6 per cent of the population in Andhra Pradesh and Muslim voters hold the balance of power in almost 100 Assembly segments and 12 Lok Sabha constituencies. "The strength of Muslims is most visible in Telengana and Rayalaseema," said Jahed Ali Khan, editor of *Siasat*. And in these regions, Muslim leaders had campaigned hard for the TDP.

The Congress has already made a move to cash in on the anti-Naidu feeling among some sections of Muslims in Hyderabad. Congress president Sonia Gandhi has initiated a dialogue with the volatile Muslim leader Sultan Salauddin Owaisi through Najma Heptullah. Another radical rabble-rouser, Syed Vicaruddin, editor of the Urdu paper *Rehanuma-e-Deccan* has been approached through P. Shiv Shankar, former Union minister, now Congress MP from Tenali.

The TDP government is taking special measures in the sensitive capital city to avert any communal flare-up in the wake of these political developments. But most TDP Muslim legislators feel that the community is keen that peace endures. "An average Muslim wants peace and a stable economy to earn his livelihood," says Dr Siddiqui, an advocate who wants the TDP-BJP drama to come to an end.

TDP Minorities Cell vice-president Zafar Javed puts things in perspective: "Neither the BJP nor the TDP government (without NTR) has any longevity in power. It is best they utilise the period for more constructive contribution to society." •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

WEST BENGAL

Mind your language

Public pressure forces the Left Front to review its position on English at the primary level

The Left Front government in West Bengal has appointed a commission to review the status of English in primary education. On the face of it, the decision is not one that is likely to raise a controversy. But in this case, it has not only created one, but is in fact the result of a long-standing public disagreement.

Moreover, it is also one of the rare examples of the CPI(M)-led government being overtly respectful towards popular opinion, especially one that does not concur with the party line.

The step is also notable for the fact that to a great extent, it has been forced not by the 'major' Opposition party, Congress—or for that matter even by the Trinamul or the BJP—but by a campaign organised by the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI).

Backed by a surprising solidarity of intellectual heavyweights and the man on the street, this campaign, for the last 15 years, has been a constant irritant for the ruling Front. Confident of mass support, the organisers went to the extent of calling a statewide general strike on the issue a few weeks before the last parliamentary elections.

One wonders, though, whether public pressure could make the ruling Marxists agree to rethink their educational policy

SHYAMAL CHAKRAVORTY

LANGUAGE BARRIER: *the SUCI-sponsored Bangla bandh*

without the presence of certain political and organisational factors. The timing was crucial, immediately after some unsettling experiences at the Lok Sabha polls which confirmed fears that the party was losing track of the people's pulse, at least in the urban areas.

Secondly, critics of the abolition of primary-level English within the party had the strongest champion of their cause they could expect: chief minister Jyoti Basu, having moorings at London's Temple. It was Basu who first indicated that his government was considering the reintroduction of the language, even if it might not be possible at the ensuing academic session. Although the minister in charge, Kanti Biswas, was still refusing to relent, he was soon mouthing the official position about the appointment of the commission at the Assembly.

Biswas's announcement was followed by Basu's clarification: "We are a responsible government. Such a decision cannot be implemented in a hurry. Steps will be taken to ensure that English is reintroduced smoothly in the 1999-2000 session."

The tenor of Basu's speech in the House made it clear that the "decision" had already been taken. The commission didn't have much to do except determine the time-frame and the modalities. Yet the name of the commission's chairman, Prof.

FOR THE MOTION: *Jyoti Basu*

OPEN TO IDEAS: *Prof. Sarkar*

Pabitra Sarkar, made many people sceptical about the outcome.

Sarkar is a known CPI(M) intellectual and was a strong advocate of the policy that banished English up to Class V in 1983. He, however, asserted that he would act impartially. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have accepted the post," he told SUNDAY. He said he would invite opinions, through the media, from all sections of the public and make his recommendations within two months.

With the SUCI-led pro-English forum already announcing that it would boycott the commission, doubts have arisen as to the chances of diverse opinions flowing in freely. CPI(M) insiders feel that a "compromise" formula would be evolved, agreeing to reintroduce English at Class III or IV.

That, again, means an a priori decision, forced by political compulsions. Said Prof. Sunando Sanyal, a former member of the state education commission who wants English back right from Class 1, "It's clear that public opinion carries no weight unless it can influence the voting results to some extent. If education policies are determined in this fashion instead of discussing all aspects with an open mind, we would only increase the damage already done."

In fact, many rounds of discussions and debates had been held in and outside the academe before the controversial policy was adopted. Was it a misreading of public opinion then that led to such a step, or has public opinion changed since?

Speaking with educationists, students and guardians from various backgrounds, one gets the impression that the reason could be both. As Prof. Sanyal says, the discussions might not have been 'free'. Party leaders might have drawn inferences on the basis of 'selective evidence'. On the other hand, the burden of English, it was thought at that time, would be a hindrance to the literacy drive among the downtrodden masses.

However, even the masses, both rural and urban, have indeed undergone a change in their perception. Because of rising aspirations as well as economic and social compulsions, most of them now view English as an essential component of literacy.

The problem, says Prof. Sarkar, is a complex one. "Linguistically, the world is divided with respect to English into an inner circle comprising countries where it's the mother-tongue or is used frequently, an outer circle of the former colonies where it is the second language and an expanding circle comprising countries like China, Japan, etc., which are having to pick up the language because of globalisation. Within the outer circle itself, there are vast differences. The Indian situation is not the same as in, say, Nigeria. So we have to design a system that is most appropriate." •

Nilanjan Dutta/Calcutta

Crime thriller

Bhanwar, on Sony, makes interesting viewing

[illegible] trying to recreate the recent past for a half-hour [illegible] spot. Most so when you are dealing with crimes of passion: you have to trace the genesis, the act itself, and the consequences. And often in the zeal to have a beginning, [illegible] and end, everything becomes too pat.

[illegible] of the latest sensational legal [illegible] the cops and the media, are the focus of [illegible] *Bhanwar* (Sundays, 9.30 pm) [illegible] the directors have managed to skirt the obvi[illegible] a problem here, but there's been a con[illegible] to keep a tight grip on events. And the acting, on [illegible] uniformly good.

[illegible] unemployed is interesting, too. A mix of black [illegible] and colour is used to signify the switching back [illegible] between fantasy and documented fact. Hardly [illegible] the obsessed Netanyal who imagines his [illegible] a lover, without falsity, but you know, by the way [illegible] suspected that this really happened. What is also [illegible]

[illegible] a progressive on Sony

[illegible] to those of us who weren't around [illegible] scandal but like frontpages and stayed [illegible] to the end, is that the case was one of the last to [illegible] by a jury. Soon after, the jury system was [illegible]

[illegible] caught, which dealt with the [illegible] guns to traders in the Middle East, [illegible] and the judgement, a shot in the arm for [illegible] been fighting this heinous practice.

[illegible] can't say the same of the other new offering on [illegible] CID (Wednesdays, 9.30 pm), directed by [illegible] Sameer Hé is a superb actor, but as the CID [illegible] is consistently sleeping out unlikely crooks, [illegible] hallucinate.

[illegible] popular Thursday [illegible] you have to [illegible] [illegible] and lead to [illegible] •

SUNDAY WEEK

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 12 APRIL, 1998

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

Keep travel and errand-running to a minimum. Too much of either will leave you flat on your back. Try setting your sights high in business operations. Valuable transactions can be carried through with large business organisations. People are likely to be most understanding.

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

Be sociable. Call on friends who may become closely acquainted as time goes by. Making a show is going to create little impression on good friends who only want your company, not your money. The art of conversation must be fostered. A club could use someone like you to keep things moving.

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

Make the most of your assets. Choose your company with care. You will appreciate your loved ones, or the one person who knows how you tick. It can be a lonely time if you want it that way. You will have something on your hands, on which you can devote all your time over the weekend.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

Stick to the straight and the narrow, and there'll be no disappointments. It will be difficult to make someone special realise that there are other people to be considered at this time. Go without rather than settle for second-best.

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

Financial hitches have to be contended with. But these can be to your advantage if you handle them correctly. It is likely that the more original and forward-looking plans and projects will be successful. Try using more imagination and creativity in business and professional affairs.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

Ensure that your time and energy are expended constructively. There is probably plenty that needs to be done. And you will feel very pleased with yourself for clearing the decks of jobs and chores, rather than wasting time in idle chatter.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

Changes are in the air. This can put you in an awkward position in case you were hoping to find everything like before. Try to keep up with the times. But there is no point or purpose in making a sudden move in any direction without consulting your partner or a senior adviser.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

Doing what is right could lead to good future prospects. You will have to concentrate on essentials, which will mean that you have less time for home affairs. Intelligent conversation will be appreciated, but only in smaller circles of friends.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

What you collect now will be the fruits of your labour: from the sweat of your brow and your personal efficiency. This is the way to make your mark at the moment. Nothing is gained by chit-chat or promises, so take on only that which you can complete within a deadline. Neighbours can be irritating.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

A prior arrangement may have been overlooked; it could have been your fault. There could be a surprise visit from an unexpected guest: recover your composure and make the most of the situation. An official can make life difficult. Don't contradict powerful people who are in the public eye.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

You are not utilising your full potential and earning power. They have been lying dormant all this while, and now is the time to look around for ways to put them to lucrative use. Interesting jobs can be found more easily. Present new plans and projects to influential people.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

Legal loopholes may ensnare you; so get expert advice in order to protect your rights. Spouses or business partners may be hiding something. It's likely that they'll tell blatant lies so that misunderstandings don't crop up in marital relationships. •

At the receiving end

Why did Atal Behari Vajpayee announce that he would never fight another election?

Vajpayee, who has delivered many cut-and-thrust speeches in Parliament, is not happy at having to be at the receiving end. So when he said he would not come back to Parliament again, an associate remarked archly that Atalji found he could dish it out but he couldn't take it.

What really cut Vajpayee to the quick was former Speaker P.A. Sangma's speech. He was deeply hurt by Sangma's observation that when Sangma was Speaker, Vajpayee's government lasted just 13 days and though it lost the vote of confidence in the House, it won the confidence of the people. "This time," Sangma said, "you have won the confidence of the House but lost the confidence of the people."

HEARD IN THE TAMIL NADU HOUSE

This Jain swings like Tarzan.

AN MP ON JUSTICE JAIN'S EXONERATION OF THE DMK AND KARUNANIDHI IN RAJIV GANDHI'S ASSASSINATION

P.A. Sangma upsetting Vajpayee

Vajpayee was also upset by the fact that friends like Pramod Mahajan and Sushma Swaraj had not come to his rescue in the House. Mahajan, in fact, had even suggested that Vajpayee should not contest any more elections. His friends advised him to grow a thicker skin.

New assignment?

Is finance secretary Montek Singh Ahluwalia being moved to the hallowed portals of the Planning Commission?

There is a lobby in the finance ministry which would like him to go. The argument is now that Planning Commission will have to be restructured. Ahluwalia will have a post commensurate to his standing in government.

— members of Planning Commission have a rank equivalent to a minister of state.

Arjun Sengupta has already resigned from the Commission and has gone to Jawaharlal Nehru University on a research and teaching assignment. So there is a vacancy. But these are arguments being trotted out by those who would like to see the last of Ahluwalia in the ministry.

However, finance minister Yashwant Sinha appears to be unyielding. He has let it be known that he needs help from all quarters in preparing the Budget and would like to retain Ahluwalia. So now it is up to Ahluwalia to prove he's indispensible.

Yashwant Sinha wants to retain Ahluwalia

Write choice

That Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, MP from Rampur, deserved to be made MP is indisputable: he ended the Congress stranglehold over Rampur, a constituency which has high percentage of Muslims, and won it for the BJP.

But to make a first-time MP a minister of state for information?

Now it appears, the BJP top brass thought he was the best person for the job — because apart from everything else, Naqvi has had some experience in writing film and television scripts and has many friends in the industry.

Often this is a disadvantage — in Naqvi's case, it was a bonus, because it got him the ministership.

CHECK-LIST

The cap and whom it fits: profiles for woman politicians in India

■ **Mamata** Banerjee, Trinamul Congress chief, has steadiness and style unique for even veterans in her party.

■ **Sushma Swaraj**, Information and Broadcasting minister, is chief minister of just an MP, say Sushma and the few that matter in rated in the BJP hierarchy. Now she has chosen to be [illegible]

■ **Uma** [illegible]

■ **Sonia** [illegible]

Austerity measures

By taking a service flight to Guwahati recently, defence minister George Fernandes tried to send a message about how socialist defence ministers should conduct themselves.

There is no doubt that during the reign of his predecessor, also a socialist, Mulayam Singh Yadav, there was rampant misuse of helicopters. Across the Boeings. Ideally, Yadav should by Mulayam Singh Yadav travelling across the country in air force aircraft that any minister in India is entitled to.

Fernandes, on the other hand, is known to be quite particular about flights when he can help it. He has moved away the assortment of cooks, orderlies, peons, drivers, etc., retaining just two for his personal use.

He celebrated his appointment in a unique way: the day he took over as minister, he threw a dinner for the children of the Burmese refugees who live in his house. Now that he's getting used to being a minister, he reports for duty at 8.00 am every morning, much to the

HEARD IN THE BJP OFFICE

For Pramod Mahajan there hasn't been any change. He has moved from PMO to PMO.

A PRAMOD MAHAJAN SUPPORTER, ON MAHAJAN MOVING FROM HIS OWN OFFICE TO PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE

CHECK LIST

Financial bungling

How did R.K. Kumar get charge of banking and revenue? The state finance minister initially wanted his choice to be appointed chairman of the Central Board of Customs and Excise (CBCE). But it became a battle of egos that he had to compromise.

The ode-doing battle with Kumar was Yashwant Sinha, Union finance minister. R.K. Kumar wanted B.P. Verma appointed to the job but Sinha put his foot down. Not only that, the minister, who is an ex-officio member of the Central Board of Revenue, ensured that Sinha was actually consulted — Solanki had to go over the

bers of the Gyanbhara Clan.

However, not only did the Prime Minister turn that suggestion down, but also issued orders that air traffic should not be disrupted just because he was travelling. Earlier, the rule was that if a Prime Minister was travelling, no other flight could take off or land during the landing or take off of PM's aircraft. This used to throw travellers out of gear, especially during the prime ministership of H.D. Deve Gowda who was habitually late in turning up for flights.

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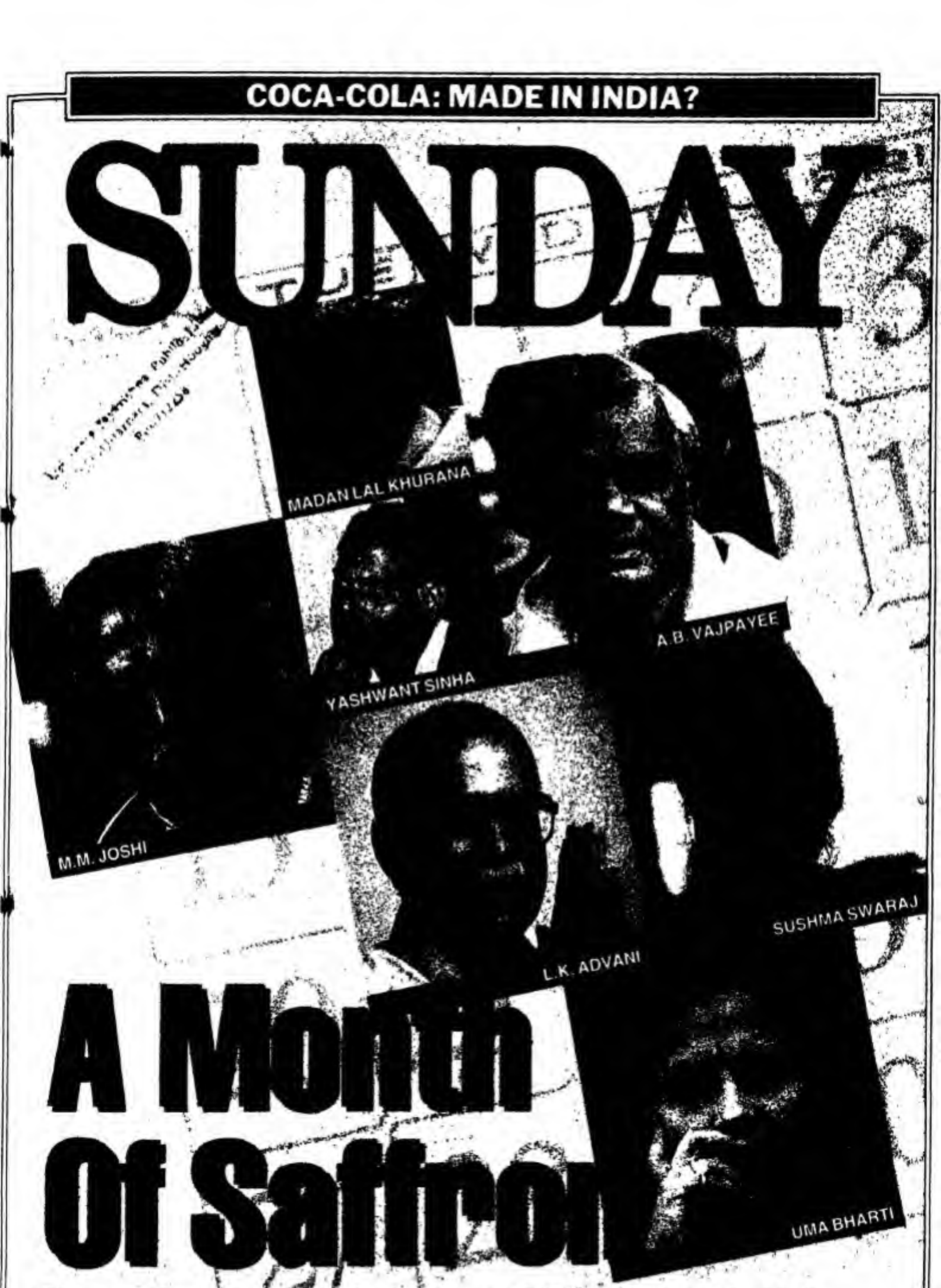
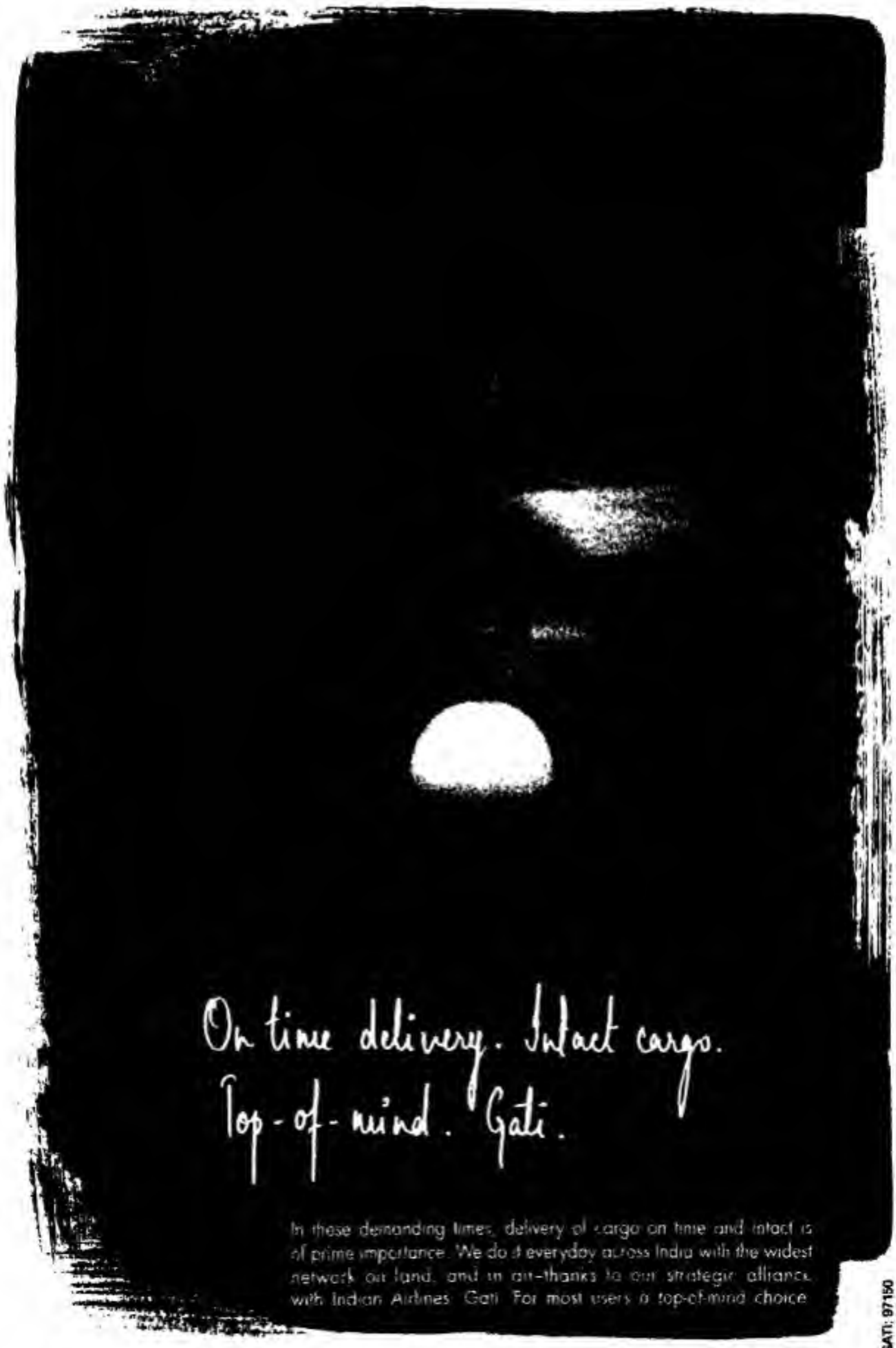
COCA-COLA: MADE IN INDIA?

SUNDAY



A Month Of Saffron

How the BJP ministers have fared, 30 days in power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The real thing

A Calcuttan claims that the Coca-Cola formula was 'made in India'!

over artwork: Subin Das

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Editor: Vir Sanghvi

Minority mindset

Your cover story *The young and the restless* (5 — 11 April) deserves accolades for the brilliant analysis of the minority mindset. It has been rightly pointed out that it's the politicians who are creating the divide among the people.

Since Independence, none of the political parties have seriously looked into the problems of the minority community. The Muslims have been exploited by the politicians to serve their own ambitions. And there is little the community can do about it. I firmly believe most of the Muslims have a deep sense of love for India. And the concept of Muslim extremism is only a media hype.

Shampa Chatterjee, Calcutta (West Bengal)

■The story *The young and the restless* makes a sincere effort to probe the psyche of Muslim youths in India. But it is truly alarming to know that there are over 5,000 Pakistan-trained extremists hiding in the country, whose principal mission is to destroy India. Apparently, their operations are being masterminded by S.A Basha, the Al Umma chief.

Muslim extremist outfits are now mushrooming in the south to unleash a reign of terror. The serial bomb blasts and the recoveries of a huge cache of bombs and ammunition from Coimbatore and Madras are only the tip of the iceberg. For the Muslim extremism in the south is here to stay.

Gita Murthy, Madras (Tamil Nadu)

Muslims on the day of Id: Indians first

Subramaniam Swamy: an enigma

Slippery Swamy

A mercurial political leader, Subramaniam Swamy will go down in the history of Indian polity as an instrument of destabilisation. Swamy of today is not Swamy of the next minute. He is a bed bug for the BJP (*Sense and nuisance*, 29 March — 4 April). And as things stand now, he will be a decisive factor in the continuance of the BJP-AIADMK alliance. But one can't predict when he will switch sides.

In fact, Swamy has an uncanny sense of manhunting. After targeting Ramakrishna Hegde, he is now after Ram Jethmalani. Here, one is forced to ask a pertinent question: didn't Vajpayee err by glorifying this man who can become a Frankenstein? Only Swamy can answer this.

U.S. Iyer, Bangalore (Karnataka)

Screen effect

The fact that two chief ministers of Tamil Nadu have been film personalities is proof enough that cinema has a tremendous influence on the people of the state (*Mandal and movies*, 24 March — 4 April). What's more, the people of Tamil Nadu also tend to identify with the characters of the films.

In a state, where films have such an influence over the masses, movie makers should be morally obliged to make films on communal harmony. And refrain from showing scenes that might stoke communal passions and incite caste wars.

Nalini Sudhakaran, Trivandrum (Kerala)

Real Hinduism

Apropos the story *Hijacking the gods* (22 — 28 March), Muslims have nothing to fear and they can safely trust the Vajpayee government. An able and honest leader, Vajpayee will take every care to see that the interests of the Muslims are served. I think the BJP would tone down its Hindutva line to ensure a stable government. And with Vajpayee at the helm, Muslims need not feel insecure.

Peter Joseph, Hyderabad (Andhra Pradesh)

■The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) is toying with the basic tenets of Hinduism and thus denigrating it. The

people of this holy land will never allow the VHP to act in the manner it has conducted itself in handling Pirana *pir's dargah*. If the senior leaders of the *sangh parivar* can't stop such anti-Indian activities, India will soon lose her uniqueness as a land of composite culture. The RSS mustn't allow the VHP or Bajrang Dal to destroy India's spiritual traditions. The VHP and Bajrang Dal need to be taught real Hinduism for what they profess now is pseudo-Hinduism.

Jitendra Mishra, Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh)

Show your CV

This refers to the story *Foreign elements* (29 March—4 April). Unfortunately, credentials are hardly considered while appointing diplomats. It seems the only qualification required is the person's proximity to the

Gujral: favouring friends

political bosses in New Delhi.

Hopefully, the Vajpayee government will see that the appointments for such key posts are offered to the right persons.

Shankar Dewan, Siliguri (West Bengal)

■K.P. Nayar's story *Foreign elements* has exploded the myth of Gujral being an efficient foreign minister. In fact, Gujral has disbursed largesse at the state's expense to his friends without even caring for its impact on the national interest.

BJP leaders: spreading their wings

No wonder, a number of intellectual friends in important places, like the India International Centre, have been praising him. When Gujral was found wanting in discharging his duties as Prime Minister, it was remarked that he performed better as the foreign minister.

All this knocks the stuffing out of his much-touted 'Gujral doctrine', based on the principle of giving unilateral concessions to India's neighbours.

V. Sagar, Delhi

Saffron swing

This refers to the story *The rise of the BJP* (15—21 March). The BJP is no longer a party of the Brahmins or the *banias* alone. The BJP has the highest number of SC and ST MPs in the present Lok Sabha. In fact, the BJP and the *sangh parivar* organisations like the Seva Bharathi and Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram have been doing tremendous work among the backwards for a long time. And that has created a solid vote-base among the backwards.

The BJP is no longer a party of the north and the west. It has spread its influence to the south, too. Moreover, the fact that 87 BJP MPs have been elected from areas considered to be "impossible for the BJP" shows the extent of the saffron swing.

Also, the BJP had contested from less number of constituencies this time. Had the BJP contested from more constituencies, it could have won an absolute majority in Parliament.

L. Rohini, Tiruchy (Tamil Nadu)

Don't blame the electorate

This refers to the column headlined *Instability factor* (22—28 March). The columnist may have rightly described the Indian electorate as 'stupid'. Because, if they weren't, they wouldn't have voted for the corrupt *"Dal badloos"*.

It is really shocking that the electorate has once again given a 'fractured mandate' But with the emergence of various regional parties, India now seems destined to have fractured verdicts every time it goes to the polls.

The electorate, however, shouldn't be blamed for this. It's time we change our Constitution and adapt it to the changing political scenario.

S. M. Mahajan, Chandigarh (Punjab)

■I think our constitutional experts must give serious thought to the columnist's suggestions, if we really want a stable government and 100 per cent participation of voters in elections.

But here, I would like to add one more to his list of suggestions: regional parties should be barred from contesting Lok Sabha elections. Because these parties play a major role in creating a hung Parliament.

L.B. Dee, Namchi (Sikkim)

Contributed by Premkala Rao, Salem (Tamil Nadu)

SUDHIR TAILANG/*THE HINDUSTAN TIMES*

■ There is no political basis anymore for treating the TDP as an alliance partner after the latter decided to sail with the communal BJP.

B.V. RAGHAVULU, *CPI(M)'s Andhra Pradesh state secretary, after his party decided to severe ties with the TDP*

■ We are more or less convinced that China is the mother of Ghauri.

GEORGE FERNANDES, *Indian defence minister*

■ As for me, I said on the day the results were out that I accepted moral responsibility. But the party has to do some thinking on other issues than the state of the organisation alone.

DIGVIJAY SINGH, *Congress leader and Madhya Pradesh chief minister, pointing out that he should not be the only one made responsible for the party's electoral debacle in the state*

■ Their job is to put pressure, but our job is not to buckle.

YASHWANT SINHA, *Union finance minister, on World bank*

■ Two generations have suffered due to the state government's faulty policy on English education. Students should be given absolute freedom in choosing to study a language.

MAMATA BANERJEE, *Trinamul Congress leader, on the controversy over reintroduction of English in primary schools in West Bengal*

■ During *Utsav*, Rekha told me that she couldn't make love before the camera to a rank newcomer. She had to check me out first.

SHEKHAR SUMAN, *film actor*

SEEN

Of Penguins and Prime Ministers

Can you write a biography without kissing and telling?

INSIDE VIEW: *Vajpayee with Rao at the book's release*

It was billed as the hottest literary event of the season. The publishers, Penguin India, confessed that never had so many people called asking to be invited to a book launch before. Of course, the ones that amused them the most were the calls from the Congress office. "Since when have Congressmen been interested in reading?" muttered a Penguin employee.

"Since Narasimha Rao started writing books," I said and smiled sheepishly as I asked for an invitation for myself. Like Congressmen, I am also not in the habit of attending book releases. Party manifestos were more my line of work.

But this one was different. And besides, it was more of a political event than a literary one. The book was written by a former Prime Minister and would be released by the present Prime Minister. If that didn't make the event political enough, then there had been enough hints in the press that the book was an insider's guide to Rao's political career, his thoughts and beliefs. Appropriately enough, the book was called *The Insider*.

The front row was occupied by Congressmen of various ranks and sizes from the Maratha heavyweight Sharad Pawar to the party's joint secretary, Anil Mathrani of the curly locks. Former President R. Venkataraman was also seen being ushered in. Had he come to see if Rao could kiss and tell better than he could, I asked myself remembering that Venkataraman's autobiography *My Presidential Years* had come out a few years ago.

"But Mr Rao does not kiss and tell," said publisher and host Aveek Sarkar in his speech, while Rao sat next to him on the dais and pouted in sympathetic response.

Later, Khushwant Singh took the mike and after a few obligatory references to the book, addressed the rest of the speech to the other chief guest of the evening: Atal Behari Vajpayee. As a member on the board of Penguin books, he even did a little commercial for the publishing house by announcing that TV anchor Rajat Sharma had been commissioned to write Vajpayee's biography. Rao, who was expecting paeans of literary praise seemed a bit put out by this turn of events. Later, he must have been thankful that Khushwant Singh had concentrated on Vajpayee instead of *The Insider* — for Singh trashed the book in his weekly column which appeared later.

After the speeches, Rao even sat in a corner and signed some copies of the book — just like any other celebrity author would do; while his friend the Prime Minister sat next to him and looked on.

As for the rest of the guests, the lesser mortals were too occupied sipping wine, while the others were busy being seen. As someone remarked — here you can see all the faces at the same time, without having to switch channels. •

Priya Sahgal/New Delhi

It was more of a political event than a literary one. The book was written by a former PM and would be released by the present PM

What next

The chief minister of Orissa got the shock of his life when the Lok Sabha results trickled in. Can he save his state?

P.V. Narasimha Rao is a friend of his. And Orissa chief minister J.B. Patnaik remembers his friends. Even when they are out of power. When Sitaram Kesri took over as party president and Rao was *persona non grata* within the party, it was Patnaik who took up his cause within the Congress Working Committee. It was the Orissa CM who asked that Rao be given a ticket for this Lok Sabha elections. Kesri gave him a choice: the Berhampur seat from Orissa could go to either Rao or Patnaik's wife, Jayanti.

Family took preference and Patnaik chose the latter. But he still invited Rao to come and campaign for his wife. Again, while other party candidates refused to even put up posters of the then party president, let alone invite Kesri to their election meetings, Patnaik rebuked his MPs. "A politician is not a film star," he said. "It is up to the organisation in the state to mobilise the crowds. You can't just blame the party president," he added. And it was from Bhubaneswar in Orissa that Kesri kicked off his election campaign. The rally was a success by all accounts.

That was in December 1997, when Patnaik was riding high. Not only was he the longest-serving Congress chief minister (in fact, his record of over 12 years as CM can only be beaten by West Bengal's Jyoti Basu), but his was also the strongest Congress-ruled state. Which is why Kesri was forced to lay his personal differences aside and offer Patnaik a CWC nomination. There was no way he could afford to antagonise this blunt and outspoken CM.

But then something went drastically wrong. Patnaik made a mistake that most politicians end up making sooner or later: he underestimated the opposition.

In the recent Lok Sabha polls, surrounded by sycophants who kept assuring him that 'all is well', he could not gauge the strength of the Biju Janata Dal and the Bharatiya Janata Party alliance.

JB's adversaries blame Patnaik for his own downfall. But he has one thing in his favour: known to be blunt and outspoken, Patnaik is respected at the Centre

Mr Patnaik?

Instead of the expected 15 to 18 seats, the Congress won as few as five seats from Orissa.

Patnaik was stumped, not by a seasoned politician but by a naive newcomer; by someone whom he had sniggered at openly — his rival Biju Patnaik's socialite son Naveen Patnaik who had entered the political arena a little over a year ago.

How that must have hurt.

But, point out Patnaik's friends, the CM was not just defeated by outside forces. His own people, headed by the deputy chief minister, Basant Biswal, worked against candidates known to be close to the chief minister, such as Pinaki Misra and the chief minister's son-in-law, Soumya Ranjan Patnaik.

The move apparently paid off. With such a poor track record, Patnaik had no defence when his detractors raised the cry of one man one post. Since the CM is also the PCC chief, this is something the Biswal camp has been demanding for a while now. Earlier, Patnaik could get away with both the posts. But now, he has no defence to offer.

He knows he will soon have to give up the PCC chief's post. And what is worse, he also knows that he may not be able to get a man of his choice in the saddle.

And if that is not trouble enough, there is all likelihood that Patnaik will have to give up another of his hats: if sources close to 10 Janpath are to be believed, then Patnaik is tipped to be stripped off his coveted CWC nomination. (Patnaik had been nominated to the working committee by both Rao and Kesri, but it seems as if Sonia Gandhi will not be as obliging).

Which is why it was a very subdued Patnaik who addressed the AICC session held in Delhi last fortnight. In fact, the speech itself was an indication of how low Patnaik's political graph had plunged: "You came, you saw, you conquered," he said, addressing Sonia. "When there was despondency within the party, you brought hope," he added weakly.

This was not the vintage Patnaik speaking. He was not even being original in his sycophancy. The least the son of a schoolteacher could do, sniggered his detractors, was to come up with something other than Shakespeare's oft-quoted lines. (Patnaik's father, the late Gokulananda Patnaik, taught Sanskrit in the Khurda district, and the chief minister himself has translated two Sanskrit epics — *Niti Satak* and *Sringar* — to Oriya.)

All this is listed in Patnaik's biodata, as well as the fact that he has visited almost all the 'important cities' in the world. "No doubt at government expense," scoffed an MLA from Biswal's camp.

In fact, his adversaries from within the party blame Patnaik for his own downfall. With Assembly polls one-and-a-half years away, Patnaik's ministry has hit the lowest ebb of factionalism. The present Lok Sabha member from Bhubaneswar, Dr P.K. Patsahani, relates an incident when Patnaik transferred a constable from his village in Rameswar "for not bowing to him".

This could well be part of the smear campaign, but, it does indicate that the state of Orissa is fast slipping out of Patnaik's grasp.

But he has one thing in his favour: known to be blunt and outspoken (the AICC speech being a rare exception) Patnaik is respected at the Centre. He is close to other CWC members such as Sharad Pawar, Pranab Mukherjee and Jitendra Prasada. Unfortunately, these three are on a weak wicket themselves at the moment.

Sonia has nothing against Patnaik. She knows that alienating the CM of the strongest Congress-ruled state would only ensure that Orissa goes the Madhya Pradesh way

On the plus side, Sonia has nothing against Patnaik. And she knows only too well that alienating the chief minister of the strongest Congress-ruled state would only ensure that Orissa goes the Madhya Pradesh way.

That is something Sonia cannot afford right now. And that is also perhaps the only thing in Patnaik's favour right now.

Can he make it work? •

Surendra Patra/Bhubaneswar

INDER MALHOTRA

Fire-fighting

The BJP government's reaction to 'Ghauri' is dignified and adequate

To its credit, the Vajpayee government's reaction to Pakistan's "test-firing" of an intermediate-range ballastic missile (IRBM), Ghauri, is both dignified and adequate. It was left to the defence minister, George Fernandes, to remind the country that the wholly indigenous Prithvi missile already covers every nook and cranny of Pakistan. Consequently, no Indian need lose his or her sleep because of the Pakistani crowing that Ghauri can target almost any Indian city.

Even according to Islamabad itself, Ghauri is still in the incipient stage of development and will not be ready for deployment for a while. But that has taken in no one. There is strong basis for the belief, by no means confined to this country, that Pakistan just does not have the capability of developing the kind of missile it boasts it has tested. The missile that was indeed launched, perhaps from Kahuta, is said to be a Chinese or North Korean missile which Pakistan brought in to "demonstrate" its missile prowess. In all probability, it is China's M-9 missile which has a much longer range than the M-11 missiles supplied to Pakistan by China as far back as 1992. What is more, the experts say that Pakistan has at most conducted a ground test of a "reconfigurated" IRBM-class rocket, and nothing more.

For, if an IRBM was really to be test-fired, Pakistan would have had to issue warning to the shipping in the Arabian Sea which never happened. There is no way Pakistan could have tested the IRBM for re-entry on land, given the limited depth of that heavily-populated country. China alone had conducted land-tests of missiles.

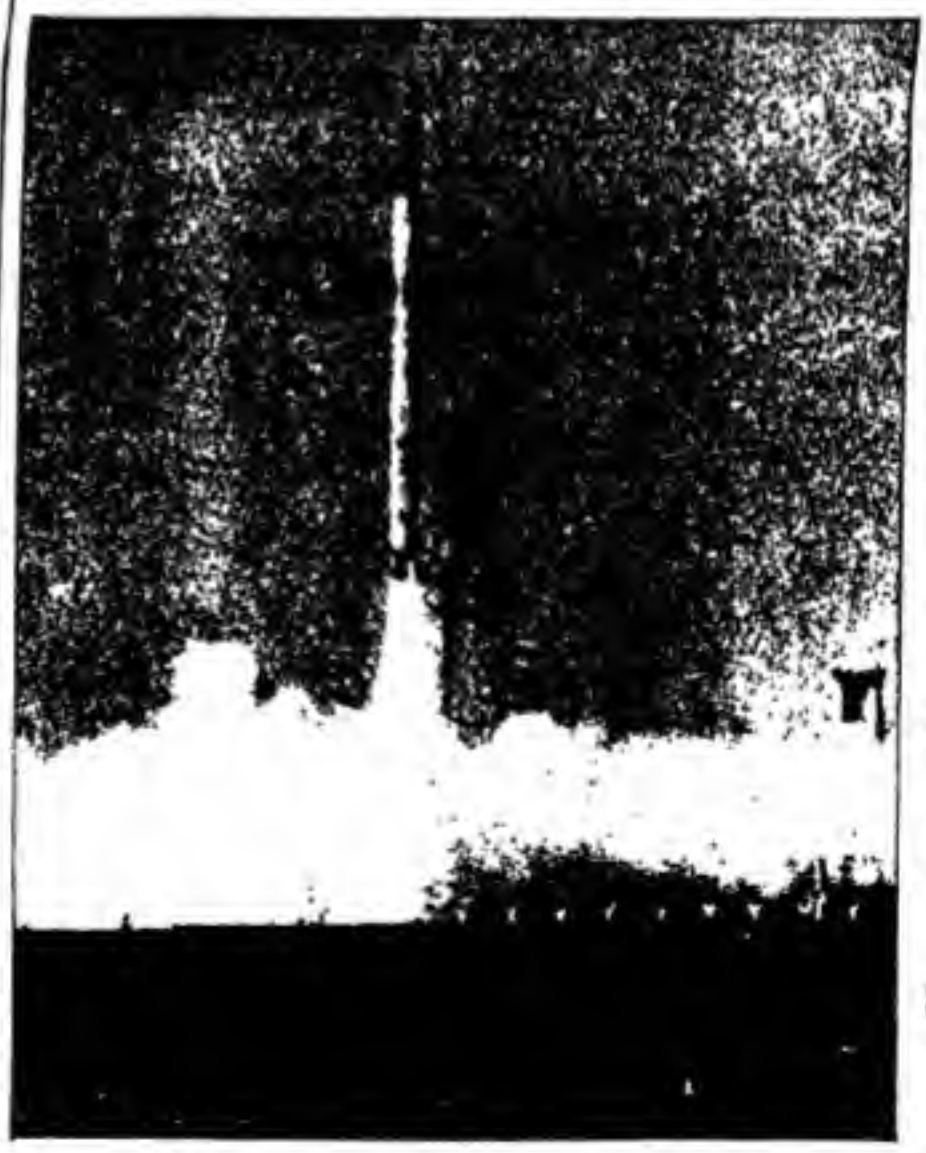
And that brings one to the salience of China in relation to Pakistan's nuclear and missile programmes. But for Chinese help, neither venture can make any headway. This help, given consistently and persistently, violates flagrantly China's so-called non-proliferation commitments under the NPT, MTCR and so on.

America's impotence to do anything about this is equally manifest. Chinese assurances, given in writing during Jiang Zemin's high-profile visit to the United States in October last, had evidently amounted to nought. Otherwise, days before the Pakistani test-firing, a high-level American delegation would not have been in Beijing, beseeching the Chinese government to end its assistance in the fields of nuclear weaponry and missilery to Iran and Pakistan. Nor is it purely fortuitous that the American officials were preceded in the Chinese capital by Pakistan's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, and army chief, Gen. Jehangir Karamat.

If Pakistan has not actually fired an IRBM, why the present fuss and posturing? The answer is clear. Pakistan's message to India is political, and the ruling establishment in Pakistan also wants to reassure its own people. In recent weeks, Islamabad has made a song and dance about the BJP's commitment to exercise the nuclear option and "induct nuclear weapons".

It suits both America and Pakistan to pretend that nuclear and missile issues in this part of the world are a kind of zero sum game being played in a watertight compartment consisting of India and Pakistan alone. This absurdity has got be repudiated firmly.

Regrettably, it must be noted that the Narasimha Rao government was guilty of undermining India's missile programme. This is why Agni, the mainstay of the Indian nuclear option, has not been tested since 1994. Unless the BJP government, which has already watered down its nuclear commitment, wants to lose its credibility totally, it must lose no time to order a fresh series of tests of Agni. •



Agni, the mainstay of the Indian nuclear option, has not been tested since 1994. Unless the BJP government wants to lose its credibility totally, it must order a fresh series of tests of Agni

N.M. GHATATE

Family ties

The RSS is no big brother in the sangh parivar

The *sangh parivar* has become the subject of focal interest since the phenomenal growth of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the Nineties. To BJP's critics, the party is just a front organisation of the RSS; and to those without an RSS background, it is a subject of curiosity. What is the common thread that runs through the BJP, the BMS, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the ABVP, Kalyan Ashram, etc?

The moving spirit of the organisation are those who joined the RSS as young boys and were inspired by it to love and serve the country. For them, India is not a piece of land but '*Punya Bhumi, Karma Bhumi, Matri Bhumi*'. "It is for this Bharat Mata," said Atal Behari Vajpayee, "that I live and I will die."

M.S. Golwalkar, popularly known as Guruji, who led and nurtured the RSS described it as a 'factory' which instilled the spirit of nationalism in young boys and prepared them to serve the country in various walks of life. The unique and common feature of the members of the *sangh parivar* is a transparent devotion to the welfare of the country — like the ties that exist among them. These ties become stronger during adversity. The RSS is not just a fair-weather friend.

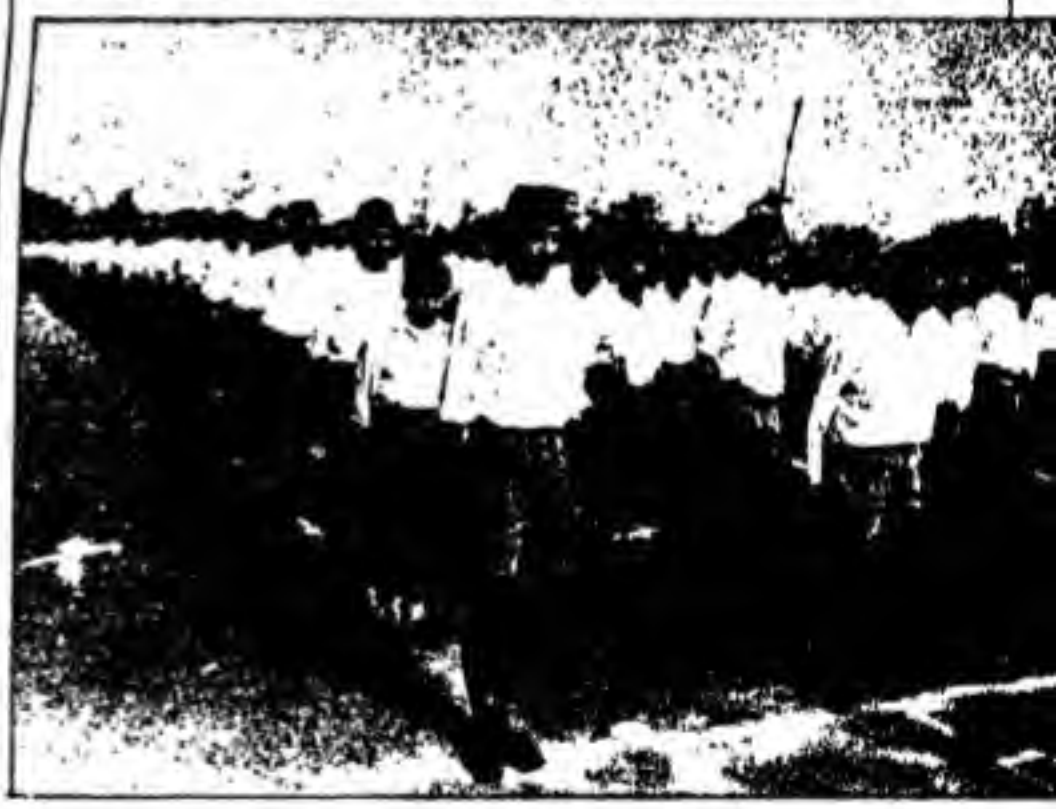
Take the role of RSS during the internal Emergency of 1975 when the entire Opposition was put behind bars and the RSS banned. Vajpayee, L.K. Advani, Madhu Dandavate and Shayam Nandan Misra — all MPs — were imprisoned in Bangalore jail. Vajpayee and Advani asked me to come to Bangalore for legal assistance. I didn't know anyone in Bangalore. The RSS *pracharaks* whom I knew were all underground. I was told to contact Gopinath, an RSS member running a business there. I had never heard of him.

He came to receive me at the airport and took me to his house where I stayed for several days. He arranged several interviews with Vajpayee and Advani, took me to Justice Subba Rao, former Chief Justice of India, and Justice Hegde whom I knew.

Those were the days when not just friends but also relatives distanced themselves from political activists opposed to the Emergency. On the other hand, I visited over a dozen jails to meet detenues and everywhere I went, I stayed with families I had never met or heard of.

There was an interesting case which speaks volumes of dedication. One Mr Shenoy, who had passed through the RSS mill as a young boy, headed a leading travel agency in Bombay and was living in style. I knew him through my father. When the RSS was banned during Emergency, my father was detained at Thane jail. I happened to mention Shenoy and learnt he was in the same jail as my father. Shenoy had been arrested because he had provided shelter to Yadavrao Joshi, the RSS-in-charge in Karnataka. Though Joshi had gone underground, they'd arrested Shenoy. This is a shining example of a person who put his comfortable lifestyle at risk and rose to the occasion when the country needed him.

Transparent affection is their winning card. During the Emergency, I requested former Chief Justice M.C. Chagla to lead the argument in Karnataka High Court on behalf of Vajpayee, Advani and other MPs. He agreed readily. On our way to Bangalore, he confided in me that the following day was his 75th birthday and that his family was keen that he stay with them and celebrate it. "But what better way to celebrate my birthday than to fight for democracy?" he remarked.

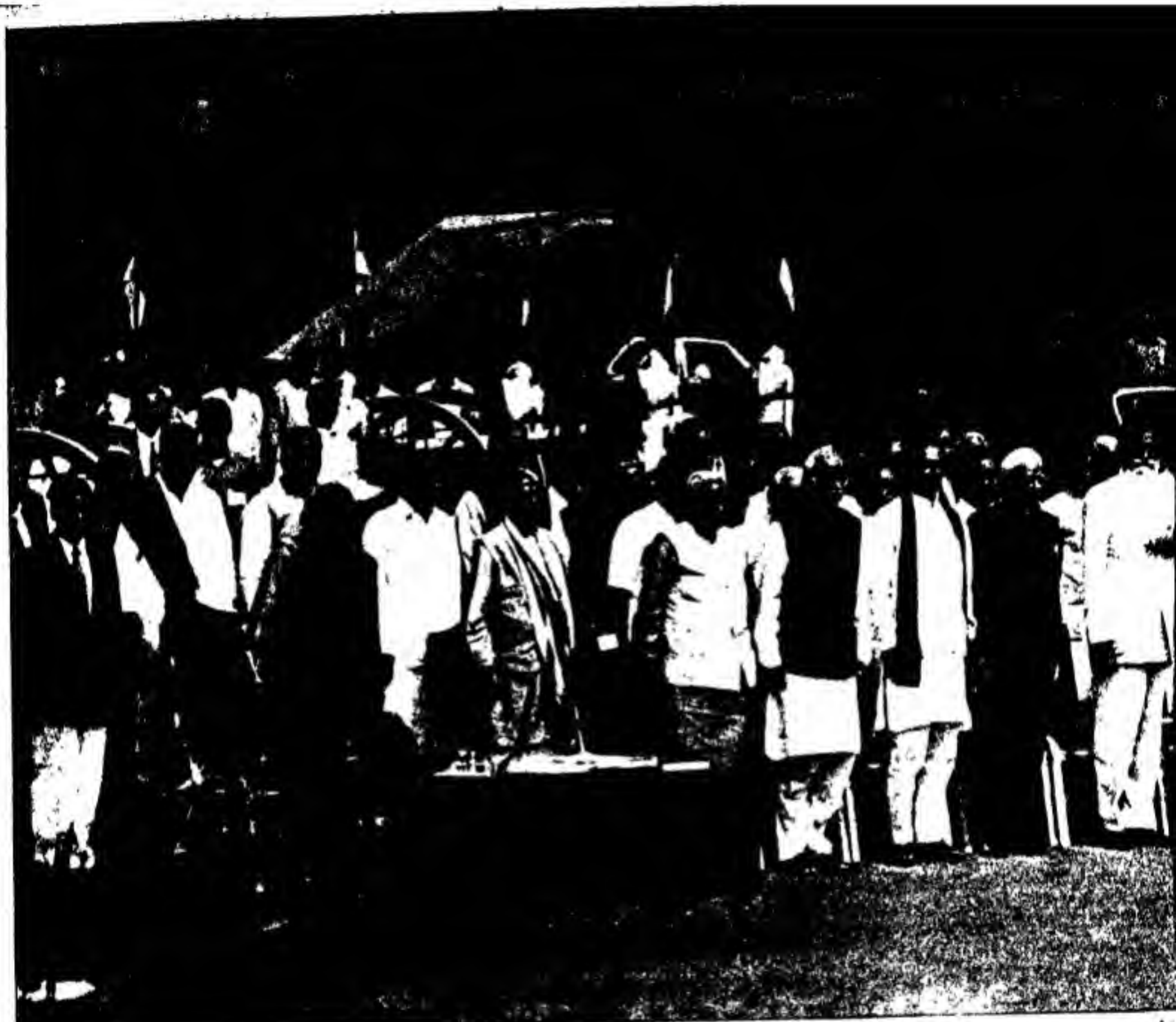


Those who joined the RSS as young boys were inspired by it to love and serve the country. For them, India is not a piece of land but *Punya Bhumi, Karma Bhumi, Matri Bhumi*

One unique feature of RSS and *sangh parivar* organisations is that they do not depend on government patronage like other NGOs. This is their strength. They are beyond influence and control of the government. The RSS leaders look at their collection as public money given in trust to be used sparingly. During the Emergency, sometimes the RSS would give me money for travel, etc. But they would never ask for any accounts and when I submitted them, they would file them without even looking at them.

Nothing is further from the truth than to say that the RSS controls the organisation. Leaders of these organisations belong to the RSS. They do consult each other on problems facing the country. It is a very simple and open relationship. The binding factor is service to the country. •

(The author is a prominent Supreme Court lawyer and a member of the BJP national executive.)



Though the BJP is still to get its act together, a composite face of the government is beginning to evolve. This is both *swadeshi* and civilised

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A MONTH OF SAFFRON

How the BJP ministers have fared, 30 days in power

It was shortly past 10.30 pm on the night of 10 April, the eve of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) national executive meeting in the capital. A journalist was desperately seeking Sudheendra Kulkarni, de facto information adviser to the Prime Minister. Enquiries at the Ashok Road headquarters of the party — where Kulkarni is also currently living — revealed that he hadn't returned home.

A call was made to the Prime Minister's residence. The operator picked up the phone and said there was "no reply" at the extension in the "area where Kulkarni normally sits". Further enquiries brought out that the master telephone had just that evening been shifted to 7, Race Course Road from 7, Safdarjung Road and only a few extensions had been put in place.

It was time to put the *'vajra'* into effect. An old residence telephone number dating back to the time when Vajpayee was leader of the Opposition yielded dividends. An 'insider' of the house answered the phone and said Kulkarni had already left. Everyone else was either sleeping or not available. Where could Kulkarni be found? The 'insider' was in a mischievous mood. "Well," he drawled, "you could check at Ashok Road.. or you could call Advaniji's residence. That's where they go to file their reports at the end of the day."

In a way, the incident sums up the story of the BJP-led coalition government so far: a hyperactive home ministry coming to terms with the relaxed pace of the Prime Minister's secretariat. In fact, though the government has completed one month in office, all episodes of crisis have been handled so far by people who have been given charge of particular sections. The man who officially presides over

(Clockwise, from top left) All the PM's men; Vajpayee being sworn in; the PM with home minister L.K. Advani

Ministers Who Matter

What they are up to

Sushma Swaraj (I&B): Has already announced that liquor advertising will have to go and has made sabre-rattling-type noises about the Prasar Bharati board. Has told friends that she'd like to see an international 24-hour news channel like the BBC on Doordarshan. That should serve the BJP well.

L.K. Advani (home): Has announced that VIP security will be rationalised. Where it is excessive or intrusive, it will be done away with. Security doesn't mean power.

Ananth Kumar (civil aviation): Has said that his priority would be infrastructural development. This could mean many things — more terminals would mean nursing constituencies; but it could also mean stalling proposals like Tata-Singapore. "The guiding principles of my ministry would be safety, punctuality and user-friendliness," he told SUNDAY.

Murli Manohar Joshi (HRD): A national youth policy is on the anvil. Also, like Draft in Israel, which makes it compulsory for everyone under 18 to give one year of their lives to the nation, the HRD ministry is working on a reworked National Service Scheme kind of system, which will be linked to the graduation degree.

P.A. Sangma (parliamentary affairs): Managed to let P.A. Sangma think he was becoming Speaker, but managed to get the 'vote of confidence' and the 'motion of thanks' to the President's address passed by a whisker. There's still the Budget to be passed and the demands for grants to be approved.

Yashwant Sinha (finance): He has the toughest job of all: he will have to seek the help of the bureaucracy in putting together a Budget which will match the innovativeness of P. Chidambaram's Budget; and then he will have the unenviable task of turfing out the very bureaucrats who will help him draft the Budget. He also has to tell the *swadeshi* lobbyists that he's not selling out to foreign investors and tell the foreign investors that he will never give in to the *swadeshi* loonies. •

TENGER GUPTA

Sushma Swaraj: I&B is one ministry which seems to be looking forward to work

the coalition remains the proverbial Mr Cool while the harried looks are left to the likes of home minister L.K. Advani and Pramod Mahajan.

Thirty days into their government, for 15, ministers have been in the 'wait-and-watch' mode. Says civil aviation minister Ananth Kumar: "Vajpayeeji sat in the cockpit on 19 March and other crew members took their positions. The plane started taxiing the next day and it finally took off only the next day when the portfolios were distributed. But, the 'safety belt off' sign was taken off only after the government won the vote of confidence." Adds power minister Rangarajan Kumaramangalam: "If you want to sum it up in one sentence, then our biggest achievement in the past month is that we've managed to find our feet."

Has the Prime Minister found his feet? Till SUNDAY went to press earlier last week, the fabled Kulkarni's appointment was yet to be formalised. Though principal secretary Brajesh Mishra and his personal secretary Shakti Sinha were in place, much of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) were still agonising over who would be sent where. The Prime Minister was inaugurating temples and holding 'janata durbars', but it was clear that the nitty-gritty of administration and policy was yet to get his attention.

Sedapatti Muthiah's resignation because of his charge-sheeting was the first crisis the government had to face after it secured the vote of confidence. The minister for surface transport, nominated for the job by the AIADMK, was charged with corruption and evading income tax. His resignation was a routine example of the AIADMK's inner-party democracy: he refused to quit until his Supreme Leader asked him to; she did; he quit and she replaced him with another MP. But Jayalalitha announced that his replacement would take charge at a Cabinet expansion in May.

If this was news to the Prime Minister, he schooled his features, gritted his teeth and smiled pleasantly at his colleagues. And then, as if that wasn't enough, another ally, the Samata Party's George Fernandes, facing problems over a balance of power among his own MPs, also announced on the PM's behalf that Vajpayee would hold a Cabinet expansion in *early* May.

Then the home minister announced that the PM would reshuffle his government before the Budget session. What could Vajpayee do when so many people were ready to carry out the functions of a Prime Minister? He endorsed his colleagues' opinion/advice/decision by agreeing that he would expand the Cabinet before the Budget session.

A lot of work has gone into the leisurely hours that the Indian PM appears to be putting in. L.K. Advani has been burning the midnight oil, ensuring that the government and the party were working in tandem. A pivot in the government is Pramod Mahajan, political adviser to the Prime Minister. Mahajan's role has come in for criticism from the Opposition because it is so open-ended. Is he a government servant? Is he a political worker? Mahajan told SUNDAY: "Newspapers may write what they want. But I am just assisting Atalji."

Though the government is important to the BJP, there are five or six ministries where the party doesn't trust anyone but itself. The home ministry, human resource development (HRD), finance, information and broadcasting (I&B), and parliamentary affairs are crucial ministries in their own assessment. What have they done in these ministries in 30 days?

YASHWANT SINHA

He has to tell the *swadeshi* lobbyists that he's not selling out to foreign investors, and tell the foreign investors that he will never give in to the *swadeshi* loonies

Heading the list of ministries most crucial to the politics of the *sangh parivar* is home. Presiding over the ministry is L.K. Advani who, many believe, considers Sardar Patel his role model. If the Iron Man was the 'builder' of post-Independence India, then Advani wants to be remembered in history books as the builder of 'new India'. However, the areas that Advani has focussed on in the very first month are part populist, part pragmatic, and mainly related to political expediency.

Knowing that VIP security is a sensitive issue as far as common citizens are concerned, the home ministry has already had several rounds of meetings on how to reduce VIP security. Advani has moved quickly on VIP security because he believes this is the kind of issue the BJP should take up: rationalising security has the psychological impact of bringing government closer to the people, which is just what the BJP wants to do.

But despite wanting to move rapidly on the issue, Advani has had to cope with the inertia of the bureaucracy. This has resulted in a spark or two flying — specifically during the national executive when the Special Protection Group (SPG) stuck to its guns and created a massive security curtain to the great annoyance of the party cadre.

Advani has also been giving substantial time to the question of replacing some Governors. While the new appointments and anticipated reshuffle are expected any day, Advani has consulted party colleagues because the choice of Governors has to be in tune with the party's political strategy in these states, several of which are likely to go to the polls by the end of the year. The issue was reportedly discussed by Advani in his meeting with party general secretaries on the eve of the executive meet.

Human resource development is another ministry on which the BJP is concentrating closely.

Even before it had managed to prove its majority on the floor of the House, the BJP had to face embarrassment for a slip-up in the ministry that BJP-

24 Hours

...of the Prime Minister

Work begins at 8 in the morning and the Prime Minister — for that is what he is now — expects people to be in place by the time he begins work. Among the first to arrive in the

Atal Behari Vajpayee: That's just the way it is

morning is his political adviser Pramod Mahajan, who thereafter remains a virtual shadow of Vajpayee. If it is the day of the 'janata durbar', then that takes up most of the morning.

The PM is "very particular" about going through files, says a source. In

is the first real encounter between Vajpayee and the world outside. Breakfast also means toast and papaya — his favourite fruit. No one is willing to say if Vajpayee likes his tea powered or plain.

He is insistent that he must ... and keep time aside for ...

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has been meeting various embassy officials. All these meetings are scheduled at the PMO in South Block. The Prime Minister has also been setting aside time for his friends of yore. These appointments are normally routed through Mrs Kaul, the old-time friend whose family "adopted" Vajpayee nearly three decades ago.

If papaya is a bit of an oddity in being the favourite fruit, then the Prime Minister's favourite vegetable is equally bland: pumpkin. The lunch gong in the household sounds at 1.30. Despite living with his adopted Kashmiri family for several decades, Vajpayee remains a *roti*-eater and with *kaddu ki sabzi* prefers curry made with *badis*.

A strict one for retreating after lunch for siesta, the Prime Minister is not to be disturbed till 3.30. The matters of the state are back then and alongwith advisers and officials, Vajpayee goes through his appointments and other meetings.

Not much of a physical person, Vajpayee does not have regular walking habits though he likes to "sneak out" of office into the garden in between appointments.

Neither is he a night person. Dinner-time is 8.30 pm after which Vajpayee—if alone and undisturbed—does a bit of channel-surfing. An insider says that besides *Aaj Tak*, which is his favourite news show, the Prime Minister simply loves sitcoms.

This is also his time for socialising, for friends and the family. Though a bachelor, Vajpayee's adopted family consists of Mrs Kaul, her daughter Namita, Ranjan Bhattacharya (the son-in-law), and their little daughter Niharika, described by some as the latest woman in Vajpayee's life.

By the time it is 10.30 in the night, the Prime Minister begins to prepare [illegible] lights are out before the [illegible] and curtains are drawn [illegible] another day in the life of the Prime Minister.

[illegible]

watchers have kept a keen eye on.

On the day of the vote of confidence, a secretary in the HRD ministry issued an inter-departmental circular saying that all decisions were to be taken in accordance with the BJP's National Agenda. This circular leaked to the Congress and Sharad Pawar, leader of the Opposition party, raised a hue and cry over it. How could the bureaucracy issue such a circular? An embarrassed Vajpayee had to tell the House that the offending circular had been withdrawn.

This happened because the HRD ministry is the one that seems set to implement the National Agenda most faithfully. As far as the party is concerned, HRD is one of *the* most important portfolios. It deals with sensitive areas like education, youth affairs, and women and children. For a party with strong ideological beliefs these are key areas for bringing about 'reforms' at a larger level.

And the fear of a 'hidden agenda' is understandable.

That earlier it was L.K. Advani whose name was being floated for this ministry says a lot. However, an equally senior leader, with strong RSS links, was finally entrusted with the job along with Uma Bharti, whose *sadhvi* credentials say a lot for what the BJP proposes to do in the HRD ministry.

They've already got into action. A national youth policy for the country is on the cards. There is talk of a mandatory one-year service for all graduates. The nature of service has to be defined.

If there is one ministry in the BJP government that is enthusiastic about 'doing' something, it is the ministry of information and broadcasting.

During the party's 13-day stint at the Centre last time, Sushma Swaraj started banning 'vulgar' advertisements. And the process is still on.

Second-time I&B minister Sushma Swaraj, in a concerted effort to bring about 'qualitative' change, banned a couple of more advertisements in the short time that she has been minister. "We have banned the sex phone call ads, allegedly meant for friendship and fun," explained Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, minister of state for I&B.

Information and broadcasting is one ministry which seems to be looking forward to work. And why not, for the BJP has a lot at stake here.

To begin with there is Prasar Bharati. Swaraj has already made the right noises by saying that the BJP is committed to media 'autonomy'. Only how they plan to define autonomy needs to be looked into. However, the ministry has decided to let the ordinance on Prasar Bharati lapse by the first week of May.

The ordinance, which sets no age-limit for the Prasar Bharati chief executive, will become inoperative once it is made to lapse. Since the present CEO, S.S. Gill, does not fit into the under-62 age bracket, it is unlikely that he will continue. Gill was a United Front candidate and the present I&B minister's uncomfortable equation with him is no secret.

With the lapse of the ordinance, the 22-member committee of MPs to 'over-see' the functioning of Prasar Bharati, which was scrapped by the former I&B minister Jaipal Reddy, will automatically stand revived.

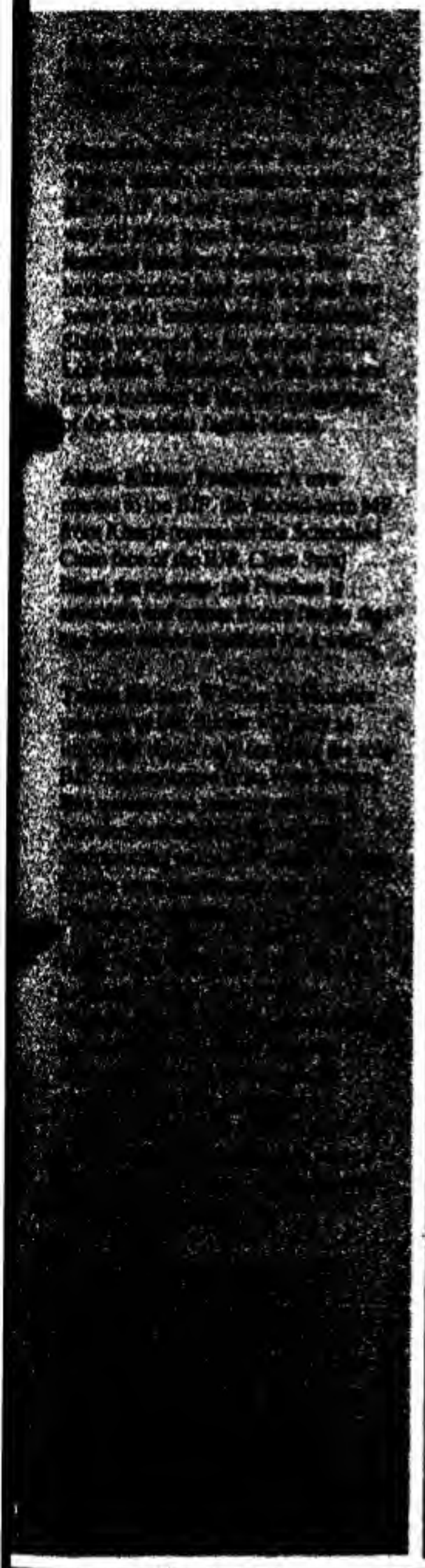
M.M. JOSHI

For a party with strong ideological beliefs, HRD is a vital portfolio as it deals with sensitive areas like education, youth affairs, and women and children

There is also a serious effort to launch a new international channel. Though the project has not taken off so far, the agenda seems to be very clear. "BBC and CNN paint the country's picture according to their perspective," says Naqvi. "We want to make it clear that India is not all about hunger, despair or fundamentalism," he adds.

The BJP is disturbed by its image abroad. They have even launched an

SATYA PAL JAIN
VIJAY GOLI
RITA VERMA
TAPAN SIKDAR



aggressive campaign against foreign media that brands them as "right-wing fundamentalists".

Last month, 'overseas' friends of the BJP sued *Newsweek* magazine for describing the BJP as a party of 'Muslim-bashing thugs'. Next in line of fire was *London Times* that described Nathuram Godse as an RSS member.

If I&B has managed to take crucial decisions in 30 days, the finance minister has managed to make a trip abroad to tell investors that the BJP is not a party of revanchist trident-wielding brick worshippers.

Yashwant Sinha to whose lot it fell (during his last term as finance minister) to mortgage India's gold, is caught in a deep bind. He has to motivate and re-educate his party as well as the bureaucracy to make both meet halfway to keep up a semblance of order in the finance ministry.

The finance minister started out on a positive note. At a closed-door meeting of investment bankers — Merill Lynch and Morgan Stanley — finance secretary Montek Singh Ahluwalia explained to 50 or 60 global fund bankers that there was nothing sinister or devious about the BJP's economic policy.

Ahluwalia explained to the gathering what *swadeshi* was all about. It did not mean a dilution of commitment to economic reforms, he said.

He also said that *swadeshi* was not meant to be a protectionist regime. All it meant was that domestic industry could look forward to a level playing field and ensure the BJP government would weed out tariff anomalies. This too would be done with a view to prevent dumping. "Every nation does this. How can you hold it against India?" he told the gathering.

This has been borne out so far. Commerce minister Ramakrishna Hegde's exim policy unveiled last week provides for the removal of tariff anomalies and the plan to set up an anti-dumping authority has already been announced in Parliament.

The way the BJP government is working is especially clear from the speed with which the committee to examine the issue of zero-duty import of capital goods for refineries was handled. This proposal was envisaged to encourage production and export of petroleum and oil by allowing industries to import capital goods without paying duty.

This move was seen as being discriminatory by domestic industry which pays upto 20 per cent duty to import commodities like steel. To resolve the matter, a committee was set up in the finance ministry on 1 December last. Comprising former planning commission member Arjun Sengupta, industries secretary T.R. Prasad and bureaucrat Arvind Virmani, it was to examine the issue and give its report in a month.

No one took the committee seriously and it didn't meet even once. Most bureaucrats forgot it ever existed. Then the United Front government fell and

V RAJAGOPAL

RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE

The commerce minister's exim policy provides for the removal of tariff anomalies

the BJP came into power. Barely was the ink dry on the result of the vote of confidence that a note reached the finance ministry, seeking directions on what to do about the complaints of domestic industry.

Though the BJP is still to get its act together, a composite face of the government is beginning to evolve. This is both *swadeshi* and civilised. If it can manage parliamentary hiccups, the government is safely airborne. •

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, Anuja Pande and Aditi Phadnis/New Delhi

CHANGE OF GUARD

It's time for a new-look BJP team to take over

By the middle of March, when it was virtually certain that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would form a coalition government, two things were clear: that the dominant lobby within the party was not in favour of allotting ministerial berths to anyone who had lost the elections; and that the principle of 'one man, one post' would be strictly enforced.

Now that the last-minute uncertainties over Kushabhau Thakre's elevation as party president have been resolved and he is to take charge as the new party president on 3 May at Gandhi Nagar, it is time for a new-look BJP team to be put in place. This is to continue the present trend of a categorical division between the party and the government while at the same time bringing greater cohesion between the two.

Expected to be nominated by Thakre within days of assuming office, several new names are currently being weighed by the party leadership.

From the present team of central and state office-bearers, the BJP will have to find replacements for three general secretaries: for Thakre's slot coupled with those of Sushma Swaraj and Pramod Mahajan, who are likely to be 'released' by the '*sangathan*' for '*sarkari*' work. Of the present general secretaries, there is little likelihood of K.N. Govindacharya and M. Venkaiah Naidu being replaced. This would mean Thakre naming at least three new general secretaries.

Party sources indicated that while Narendra Modi is a near certainty, Sangha Priya Gautam and Sumitra Mahajan are close runners at the moment. There has also been some talk of inducting a Muslim leader as general secretary. If this finds favour with the party leadership then Tanveer Ahmed — currently a national secretary — may be elevated.

But the three being currently considered front-runners, are also national secretaries. While Narendra Modi has staged a comeback after coming under a cloud, Gautam and Mahajan are being considered for the constituencies they represent. Gautam — as his name suggests, is a favourite of the *sangh* — also has the added advantage of being from the Scheduled Castes. Hailing from western UP and showing abilities of being a charismatic leader, he would be a good counter to the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) within the Dalits. Gautam is likely to get the nod over the more 'senior' SC leader Bangaru Laxman, as with Naidu already a general secretary, it is not politically logical to have two equally senior office-bearers from the same state.

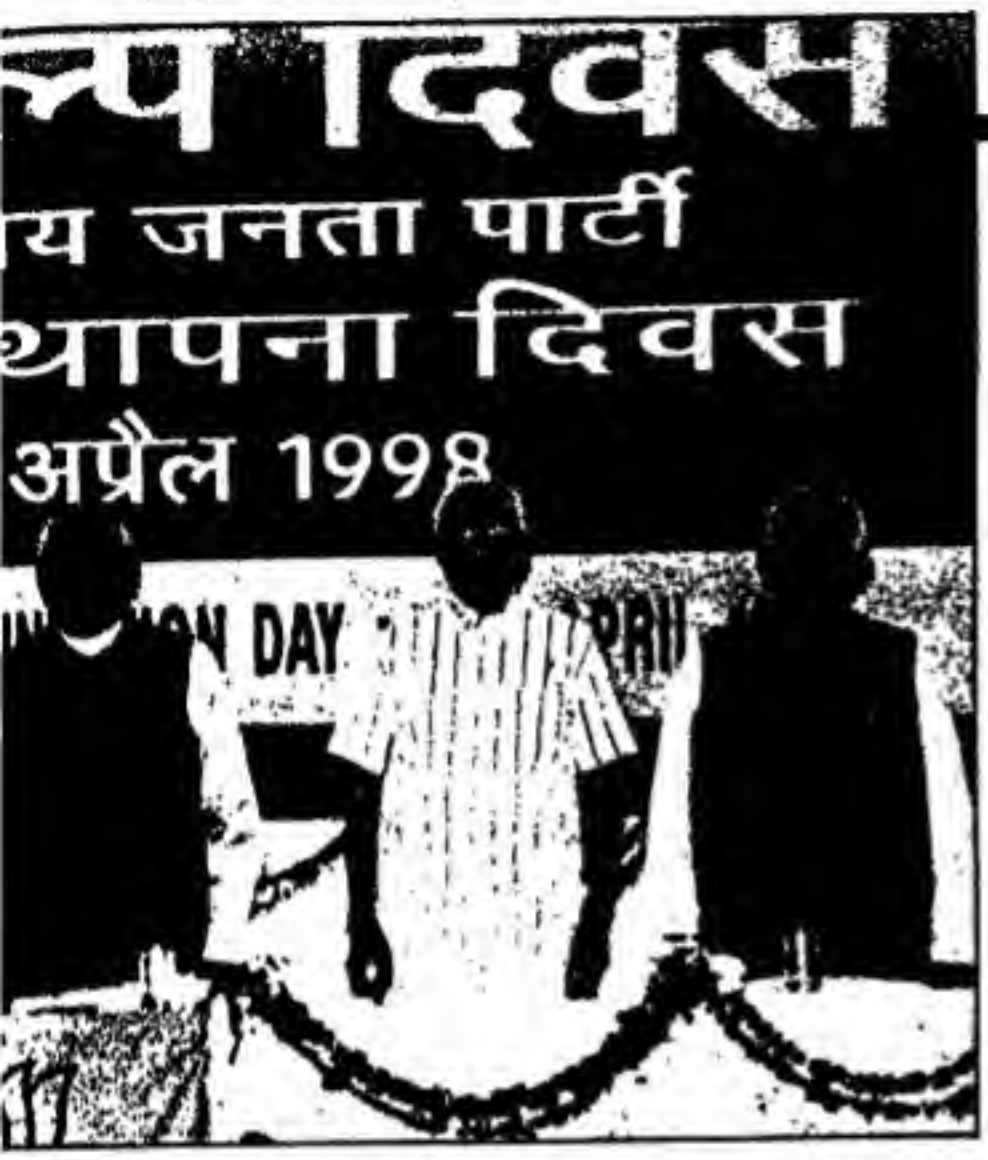
Sumitra Mahajan, the MP from Indore, is also one of the 'emerging' faces of the BJP. However, the party leadership is yet to make up its mind over whether

THE GAINERS

Narendra Modi: RSS traditionalist who created a controversy because of his handling of party affairs in Gujarat. His career saw a swift rise in the course of the Ayodhya agitation as he was responsible for mobilising the army of *kar sevaks*. Considered by many to be the main 'precipitator' of the 1995 crisis in Gujarat which led to a split in the BJP, because his critics said he was too much a Keshubhai Patel man. However, the spectacular success of the party in the polls after Modi was given charge of the state unit indicates he was the one who was right all along.

Sangha Priya Gautam: Has always advocated broadening the social base of the party and diluting the upper-caste image of the BJP. Has the added advantage of being among the few organisational leaders with a mass base of support. Moorings in western UP and his caste (he belongs to the Scheduled Castes) are added advantages.

Sumitra Mahajan: Being a woman she has natural advantages. Is committed to reservation for women. The fact that she is one of the few women leaders comes as a bonus.



The party structure will remain all-important and no key government decision shall be taken without consulting the *sangh parivar*

V RAJAGOPAL

Kushabhau Thakre: one man, one post

to place her in the government or the organisation. If it is decided to 'reserve' her for the government, then Thakre will not include her in his organisational team.

The BJP will also have to induct two new vice-presidents as the principle of 'one-man, one-post' will also apply to Madan Lal Khurana and Keshubhai Patel. Besides, there are also some 'vacancies' for the post of secretary as besides those like Modi who are to be elevated, Ananth Kumar has already become a Cabinet minister. Besides, Tapan Sikdar, after his Dum Dum victory in West Bengal, is a front-runner for a ministerial slot. In effect, this means that the BJP will have to induct at least five new office-bearers.

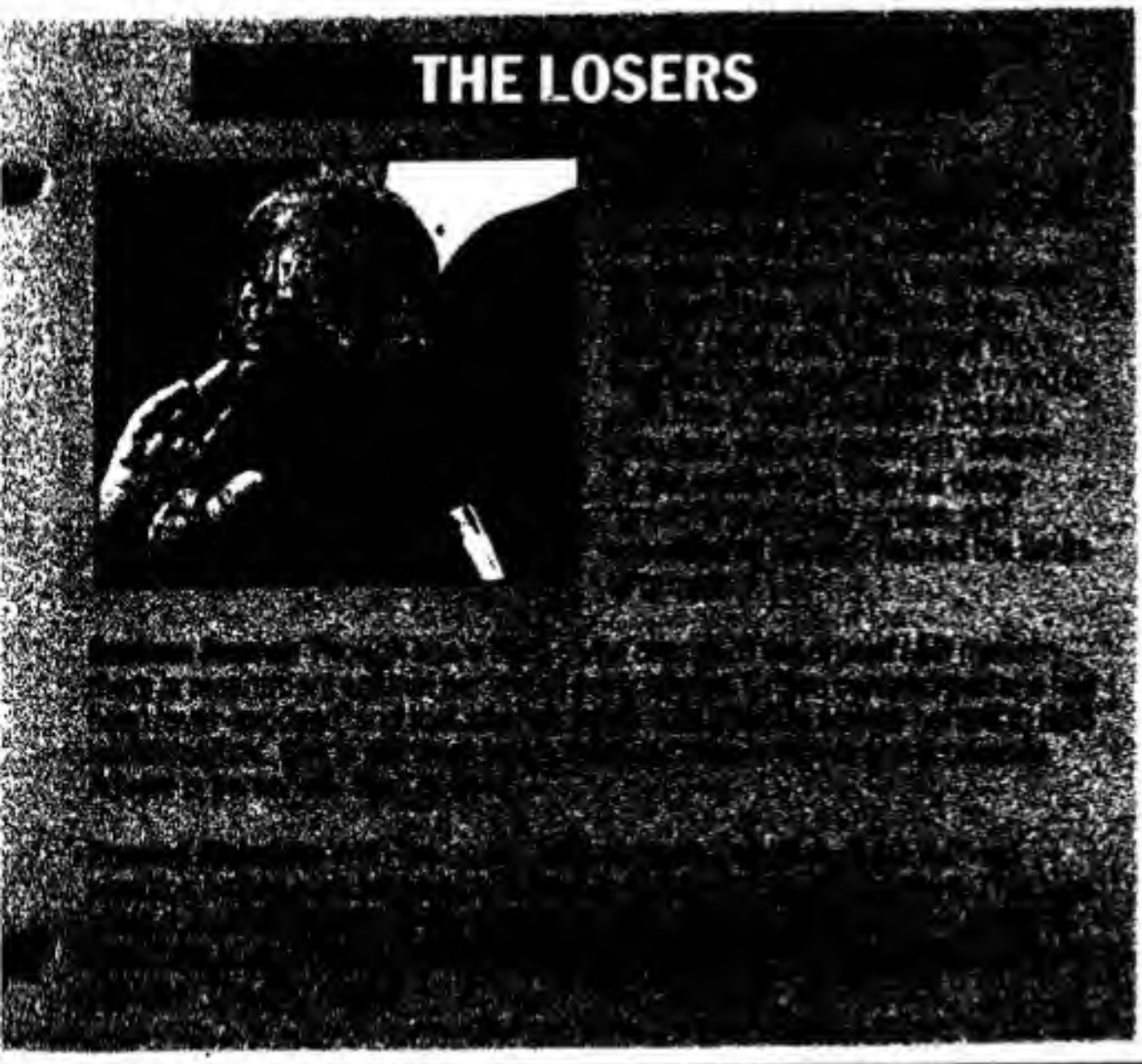
There are also some state units for which new office-bearers have to be appointed. This includes Bihar where there is a bitter power struggle between the old guard and the new guard. While the old guard would want their own man to replace Yashwant Sinha, the younger lot who have Govindacharya's support, want Nand Kishore Yadav.

Uma Bharti is another member of the Vajpayee ministry who will have to quit her organisational slot of the chief of the party's youth wing. This would mean a new face to head the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha.

Party sources indicated that several new faces are likely to be inducted in the BJP from other organisations of the *sangh parivar*. Similar to the earlier inductions of people like Govindacharya and Sushil Modi in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, this time also the newcomers are to be bloodedin fromorganisations like the Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM), Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), and directly from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

It is evident that the party structure will remain all-important and no key government decision shall be taken without consulting the *sangh parivar*. While the two-day bash at Gandhi Nagar will be naturally jubilatory in nature, the new president, along with the new-look team, has his task cut out. •

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay/New Delhi



One more in the bag

ULFA vice-chairman Pradip Gogoi walks into a trap laid by the army and the police in Calcutta

The glow of neons was familiar and reassuring. It was a little past 10 pm on 8 April when Pradip Gogoi, ULFA vice-chairman, walked leisurely down Lindsay Street, a fashionable shopping mall in Chowringhee — Calcutta's famous commercial hub. Most shops had by then downed shutters. The swirl of shoppers and flow of cars had eased, and Gogoi, with a small blue bag slung on his shoulder, walked past weary urchins and late-evening hangers-on.

To Gogoi, everything appeared as normal as it should at that hour. A few scattered people, rows of parked cars in the dimly-lit parking lot opposite Globe theatre, and rickshaws and taxis expectantly waiting for customers to emerge from movie halls where night shows were soon going to be over.

Despite the air of calm and the apparent normalcy, there was a lurking danger which even an operative of Gogoi's training and calibre failed to perceive. He walked along nonchalantly, unmindful of the fact that eight pairs of eyes were tracking every inch of his casual and languid movement.

"Come with me, Mr Gogoi," a policeman in plainclothes accosted him rudely, flashing his identity card. He was S.P. Dutta, officer-in-charge, Taltala police station in central Calcutta. It was 10.15 pm when the drama began.

"I am Simran," Gogoi shot back, looking suitably surprised. He tried to tell the policeman that he wasn't Gogoi and hadn't the faintest idea of who was being referred to. Surely, there was a mix-up somewhere.

But the officer persisted, asking him to hand over his blue bag. Gogoi complied without much fuss, and Dutta unzipped it promptly, plunged his hand inside and fished out a wig. Then, in a flash, he signalled to his aides, and seven men, all belonging to Calcutta Police's special branch, emerged from their shadowy stations to form a ring round Gogoi.

The wig gave Pradip Gogoi away. The much-wanted vice-chairman of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), which is waging a secessionist war in Assam, was hustled into a waiting car, which took him first to the Taltala

In and out of jail

Gogoi's many stints in custody

Pradip Gogoi, 43, is one of the founder-members of ULFA, which was formed in Sibsagar in 1979. In fact, Gogoi comes from the Bethari Mouthgaon village in Sibsagar district. Before joining the ULFA, he was a member of Asom Jatiayatabadi Yuba Chhatra Parisad.

Gogoi has been the organisation's vice-chairman for a long time and was one of its key men liaisoning with foreign agencies. He was a guest of Islamabad from March to December 1991.

Ideologically, Gogoi is believed to be a moderate. He would have much preferred to hold dialogues with the Centre, if he could have his way. But the more militant elements within the ULFA leadership have managed to prevail on the outfit. Today, Gogoi is seriously ill and is in need of medical care.

Gogoi was first arrested along with two other ULFA leaders — Sasha Choudhury and Sunil Nath — in 1987. But all of them jumped bail. He was held again in 1991, when, for the first time, the idea of a dialogue was floated. Gogoi was released on condition that he would convince his party leaders to hammer out a settlement. But the initiative proved abortive. Then, he was arrested again in 1994 and was released on bail in 1996 on grounds of ill-health.

Finally, in Calcutta, he was taken into custody yet again on the 8th of this month.

PRADIP SANYAL

Pradip Gogoi after being produced in court: end of the road

Arrest or surrender?

Theories doing the rounds

THEORY 1: Gogoi has been arrested because the army really wants to press the advantage the security forces are presently enjoying. Gogoi's arrest could lead to the busting of ULFA's network of political contact-persons, sponsors, arms-suppliers and even NRI sympathisers.

THEORY 2: Gogoi's arrest will put pressure on ULFA to rethink its strategy and opt for dialogue. Gogoi himself had advocated peace talks.

THEORY 3: Gogoi gave himself up because he is ill and is unable to cope with the rigours of life underground.

THEORY 4: Gogoi has 'surrendered' because he has been marginalised within ULFA. The arrest drama has been stage-managed by the army. Gogoi is also believed to have had serious differences of opinion with ULFA commander-in-chief Paresh Barua, who calls the shots.

The army and the police claim the arrest of Pradip Gogoi to be a major breakthrough. They expect Gogoi to spill the beans in course of his interrogation

PS and then to the central lockup at Lalbazar, the Calcutta Police headquarters.

The police team that lay in wait for Gogoi had been tipped off by the military intelligence wing about the ULFA leader's movements and whereabout. The army had evidently been monitoring him closely and had given the police a detailed brief, to the extent that Gogoi would be carrying a wig in his shoulder bag.

But Gogoi tried to keep up the pretence for the next few hours. It was only at 2.30 am that night, after three hours of relentless grilling by sleuths, that he finally gave up. "Yes, your apprehension is correct. I am Gogoi. Now you can take me in your custody. But I am very much sick," he is said to have told his interrogators.

Gogoi is suffering from cervical spondilosys and came to Calcutta for medical treatment. He is said to have had undergone an operation in a Bombay hospital in 1996, but was in need of further treatment as complications reappeared. Gogoi told the police that, on the evening of his arrest, he had gone to see his doctor living in the Shyambazar area of north Calcutta and showed a metro rail ticket to back is story.

On 7 April, ULFA completed 19 years of its existence, and it was ironical that, on the very next day, Gogoi's arrest dealt it a body blow. Gogoi has been booked under TADA. According to an Army press release, he was involved in a number of armed robberies, bomb blasts, killings, promoting nexus with foreign-based arms-delears etc. The Assam police has five charges against Gogoi, including two under TADA.

The arrest is being seen as a major breakthrough by the army and the police, who expect Gogoi to spill the beans in the course of his interrogation. The

police in Calcutta were hoping to get the names and addresses of ULFA's contact persons in West Bengal and other eastern states, besides gaining insight into the insurgent group's arms procurement operations. "There seems to exist a very powerful and sensitive nexus," a senior police officer told SUNDAY.

Gogoi's arrest comes about five months after ULFA general secretary Anup Chetia was nabbed in Dhaka last December. Chetia is currently being held in Bangladesh and has been charged with unlawful entry and possessing forged travel documents. And now, with Gogoi behind bars as well, the authorities are optimistic that they will soon have the ULFA on the run.

Already, Gogoi is said to have given the names of people who have been helping ULFA in Calcutta, including those of a few top-notch businessmen. He has also explained how Calcutta and West Bengal are being used by north-eastern militants as a staging-post to Bangladesh and South-east Asia. He is also expected to provide details of ULFA camps in neighbouring countries.

Some insurgency watchers are, however, sceptical about the police and military brouhaha over Gogoi's arrest and wonder whether his detention will make any difference to the ULFA and the insurgency it is leading in the Brahmaputra Valley.

They tend to believe that Gogoi had been largely marginalised in recent times partly due to his ill health and partly because of his tilt in favour of a dialogue with the Centre. As far as ULFA's grass-roots network and firepower are concerned — they remain partly intact despite counter-insurgency operations — Gogoi had been rendered increasingly irrelevant. In fact, Gogoi has himself told interrogators about his differences with Paresh Barua, the ULFA commander-in-chief.

In fact, ULFA's present activities suggest that the quartet — Arabinda Rajkhowa, Pradip Gogoi, Anup Chetia and Paresh Barua — that once ran the outfit hardly remains effective today. While Rajkhowa, Gogoi and Chetia were known to have taken refuge in neighbouring countries and were travelling in the West, trying to muster diplomatic support against army operations, 'commander-in-chief' Barua remained with the boys in their malaria-infested camps in the Bhutanese Terai and inside Bangladesh. At the ground level, where militants still snipe at the army and often get killed in encounters, men like Gogoi, Chetia or Rajkhowa don't seem to command absolute loyalty nor appear to be in actual control.

There is little doubt, however, that the militant group is presently under considerable pressure. With the Awami League government in Bangladesh refusing them sanctuary, the rebels have lost a secure retreat. Their money supply, too, has dwindled to a trickle in recent months, especially after the Assam government clamped down on tea companies that were paying ULFA to buy peace. Today, even small businessmen served with extortion notices are picking up courage to seek police help.

What has furthered queered the pitch for ULFA is the sudden cessation of

hostilities between the Indian armed forces and Naga separatist guerrillas. Both sides have agreed to a ceasefire and to hold talks to arrive at a negotiated settlement. This has altered, even if temporarily, the counter-insurgency scenario in the north-east where the army has been relieved of nerve-wracking pressure at least in one area. It can now focus on the Brahmaputra Valley more intently.

Previously, two major army operations — Bajrang and Rhino — has failed to crush the ULFA militants, but the AGP government's Unified Command, launched in January last year, had made an impact by ensuring 'better coordination' among the various security forces. The army claims that about 250 rebels, including some women, are currently holed up inside Bhutan, where the ULFA has set up its general headquarters.

A day after Gogoi's arrest in Calcutta,

(Above) Paramount Hotel: Gogoi's last refuge in Calcutta; (left) The Assam Bhawan: IB sources point out that secret meetings were held here between government officials and ULFA activists

the army overran an ULFA camp inside the Manas wildlife sanctuary on the India-Bhutan border in Assam's Barpeta district, and arrested an 'area commander'. The army hopes to extract from the arrested man a graphic description of ULFA camps in Bhutan.

The Army says some of the rebels in the camps in Bhutan are feeling frustrated. "They are living a horrible life in the camps, spread over an area of about two square kilometres," said a senior army officer. "They are cut off from their district-level cadres, while the camps are running short of funds and supplies."

The ULFA, however, denies this. "We are in full control. There is no communication gap. The leaders are in constant touch with one another. No force can finish off the ULFA," says Mithinga Daimary, ULFA's central publicity secretary.

But ULFA does realise that the situation is only going to get tougher and has been making certain organisational and ideological changes to cope with the emergent reality.

First, it is now vigorously trying to consolidate its armed wing, which was sought to be given the status of a "regular army" by an amendment in ULFA's

PRADIP SAIKIA

constitution in November 1995. It was decided that while the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) would become a "political party", the armed wing, to be known as the United Liberation *Force* of Asom, would have a typical army hierarchy with designated operational commands.

And this is what makes Paresh Barua — an elusive pimpernel who commands the boys with the guns — the key figure on whom Assam's political and psychological future greatly hinges.

Secondly, ULFA, perhaps out of expediency, is toying with the foreigners issue, though in the mid-Eighties it had vowed to shun all ethnic biases. This could firm up their ties with the All Assam Students Union in the Brahmaputra Valley and push all political parties into the defensive.

Pradip Gogoi

A flicker of hope [illegible] jealously [illegible] been snuffed out [illegible] to be known that Sanjoy [illegible] young social worker [illegible] the NGO AVARD-NE [illegible] and killed by ULFA cadres [illegible]

Sanjoy Ghose's wife [illegible] hoping against hope

after he was abducted on 4 July last year.

Pradip Gogoi told the police on 12 April during interrogation that Ghose was killed by his executors despite specific instructions from ULFA commander-in-chief Paresh Barua that no physical harm should be done to the hostage. Gogoi's statement ends all speculation about [illegible]

Does the arrest — or shall we say re-re-re-arrest — of Gogoi point to a hiatus within the ULFA leadership, a cleavage between 'commander-in-chief' Barua and the theoreticians?

It's known that Gogoi, Chetia and Rajkhowa had once seriously contemplated negotiations with the government when the army turned on the heat during Operations Bajrang and Rhino. But it was the unyielding Barua who had prevented them from taking the soft option.

One theory doing the rounds suggests that Gogoi is acting as an emissary of the pro-dialogue leaders and that this entire drama about his arrest has been stage-managed by the army.

In fact, Intelligence Bureau sources told SUNDAY that this wasn't Gogoi's first visit to Calcutta. They say they had information about a number of secret meetings held at Calcutta's Assam House between ULFA functionaries and Assam politicians and officials. They are, however, unable to name the participants or say what had transpired in the meetings.

That there is something abnormal about Gogoi's arrest was evident from a story splashed by a Calcutta daily. It said that the ULFA leader had in fact been picked up by the army two days before he was actually arrested by the police on the 8th evening. The story claimed that Gogoi, who had checked in as Ashok Kumar in Hotel Paramount on 4 April, had been taken away from his hotel room by some armymen on 6 April. The army has neither confirmed nor denied the story.

It looks as though Gogoi's arrest was prompted by more than mere security concerns. And the politics behind the move could become apparent in the coming months. •

Anish Gupta with Soumen Datta/Calcutta and Dilip Chandan/Guwahati

One is fun

Especially if that one is TDP's firebrand, Renuka Chowdhary

She has a glib answer for everything: from serious questions on how to handle India's population problem to trivial ones such as whether she really threw a slipper at a rallyist.

To deal with the first, Renuka Chowdhary, the then minister of health, coined the catchy 'one is fun' slogan; and then got down to the serious business of popularising population control and a one-child family. As for allegations of distributing her footwear among the general public, she laughed and waved a somewhat large foot in her defence. "Have you seen my foot-size? It's so difficult finding chappals my size that I'd never throw them away," she says indignantly.

Hate or love her; you have to laugh with her.

But that was two months ago. When Renuka was having fun. She was minister of state for health in the United Front government (true, she would have preferred Cabinet rank, but being Renuka she sulked for a while and soon got down to enjoying her new job); she was also a Rajya Sabha member from Andhra Pradesh and had a good equation with her boss, the Telugu Desam Party's Chandrababu Naidu.

Then came the election and Naidu's turnaround. While all the other four TDP ministers in the UF government were given Lok Sabha tickets to fight the elections, Renuka was denied one. Naidu claimed that he had offered Renuka one from Secunderabad, but the lady had refused and instead asked for one from the Kakinada constituency. However, Naidu did not oblige.

Those close to the chief minister say that he was already fed up with Renuka's pushy ways — for instance, she had complained when she was made minister of state, while a first-timer like Yerran Naidu got Cabinet rank — and was looking for ways to sideline her. This seemed like the ideal opportunity.

And one he followed up when it came to handing out Rajya Sabha nominations from the state in April this year. Renuka's own term had expired, but her name did not make it to the list of TDP candidates. In other words, if the TDP did join the BJP at the Centre, Renuka wouldn't get her old job back.

She has matured somewhat since then. True, she still sulks when she is denied what she thinks is rightfully hers; but gone are the days when Renuka would hurl her chappals around to make that point

It is not just a question of wounded pride. As minister of state for health, Renuka was arguably one of the more efficient ministers in the United Front government. Her 'one is fun' campaign made news — but for all the right reasons. Bureaucrats in the health ministry agree that after a long time, something positive was being done about serious issues such as health care, population controls and administrative reforms in hospitals.

More so compared to the other ministries which were also in the news during the brief 18-month tenure of the UF government. Such as the aviation ministry and the Tata-Singapore Airline deal. Or the information and broadcasting ministry and the Prasar Bharati Bill.

Or else, take the famous level playing field and compare her with the other women ministers in the government. Such as the then minister of coal, Kanti Singh.

So, it could not be because of bad performance that Renuka Chowdhary was sidelined. What then?

Most political watchers claim that it is because of her efficiency, political contacts and vivacity that Renuka makes more enemies than friends. It was her active protests against Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy's government — after the then chief minister, NTR, was toppled — that first brought her to NTR's notice. He then promoted the young firebrand, much to the chagrin of other senior leaders such as P. Upendra. Renuka was then nicknamed the *enfant terrible* of the TDP.

She has matured somewhat since then. True, she still sulks when she is denied what she thinks is rightfully hers; but gone are the days when she would hurl her chappals around to make that point. Those expecting her to attack Naidu for sidelining her are a trifle disappointed.

Sure, for the moment Renuka Chowdhary is down and out. But life is an epic. And in that other epic, the heroine of which is probably Renuka's ideal, Scarlett O'Hara says: "Tomorrow is another day." •

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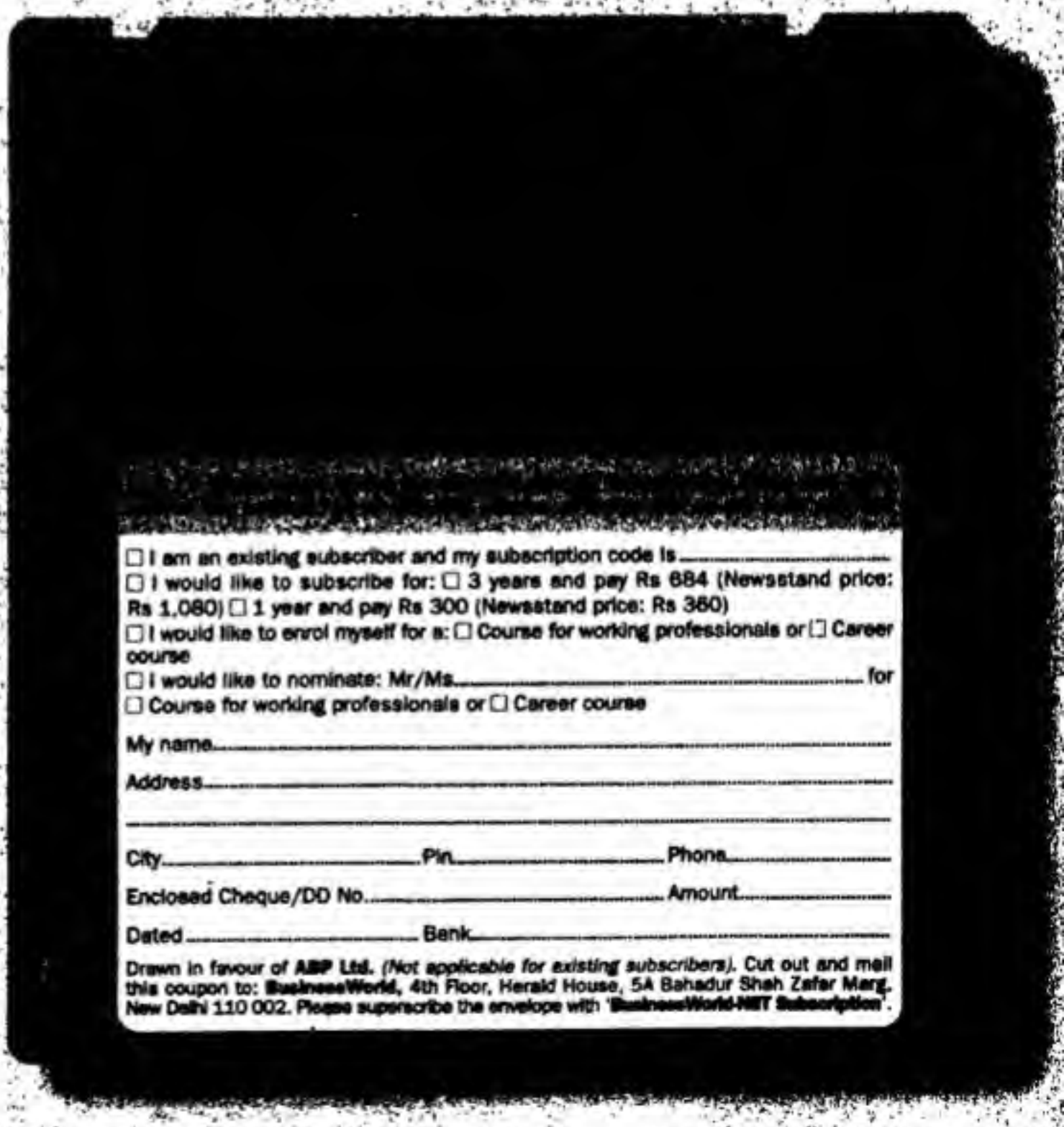

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Shadows of the mind

An evening with Ganesh Pyne at his first major solo exhibition

Flames flickered as the strips of cloth burned. Angry, menacing little tongues of flame on the water's translucent surface. Someone had set the boat on fire. Who was it? Who else, but a little boy in love with images. "I sat mesmerised, watching the flames play below the surface," recalls painter Ganesh Pyne. His fancy ignited, it was the blackened hull of a burnt-out ship against the red and amber hue of a burning backdrop.

Imagination? Fantasy? Words without context mean nothing. But then, it's words that create the context — childhood, myth, memories, the soft, vivid lullabies of a doting grandmother. We tend to forget easily, shaping, reshaping our postures to the world. This is where the difference lies. Ganesh Pyne remembers; every detail, every passing thought that came into his mind, sank into the unconscious to be awakened again, maybe years later. "The little stories I heard helped me create a fantasy world. It's still there."

Only it's a brooding, turbulent world where death dominates. Grasping shadows like cynical penumbras of life; stark, skeletal figures; deformed hands that are more claws than hands — it's a dark, surreal world without redemptive light.

"I can't paint pictures of happiness," says the 61-year-old artist. It's a legacy from his past: the early loss of a father, the struggle to establish himself as a painter, the odd jobs that gave him a pittance. Those were bleak years. "It was not that I would have starved," he says. "But being self-sufficient at the right time...that didn't happen. That feeling of insecurity is still there. Even now."

What would you call it — humility? Not the hateful, obsequious kind, but the firm, confident modesty of a man who isn't swayed by fame. That's the first thing that strikes you about Ganesh Pyne as he steps inside the Centre of International Modern Art (CIMA) gallery, Calcutta, where over 106 originals, spanning 50 years of his work, are being exhibited. The month-long retrospective also marked the release of critic Ella Datta's book on the artist, *The Life And Times Of Ganesh Pyne*.

SUDIP ACHARYA

> There's nothing sensational in my paintings that can attract. Those who buy my work have to first understand me

For Pyne, recognition has come late. This is his first major solo exhibition, a sad reminder of the Indian mindset. It's a different matter that today his tempera canvases sell at close to a million while art dealers offer more than half-a-lakh for his sketches and scribblings. Yet the insecurity persists. "I have to paint what my buyers want. I realise there are people who like my paintings, but they are few in number.

"There's nothing sensational in my paintings that can attract. Those who buy my work have to first understand me." Sitting before him, across a glass-topped table at CIMA gallery, you realise that it's just an honest self-appraisal, nothing more. "Money,fame,adulation — they are just incidental. What is important is not what has happened, but what could have been. I can't accept reality as truth."

And so in painting after painting, he explored this ambiguous, half-lit, half-darkened world of the subconscious, the world of Jung where symbols and memories tossed and mingled in the lonely child's precocious mind. Like when the 'armada' burned — magic flames on a magic 'sea'.

But that was Pyne the child. How did the artist evolve? Because, in a sense, it meant reconciling the two worlds — the fabulous, inner world of the imagination and the merciless, blinding reality.

The reconciliation came naturally, even as he continued to grow up in a crumbling north Calcutta house, entranced by Rembrandt's use of light and shade and understanding Paul Klee's sense of structure. "It's as if he is constructing a huge mansion where every single brick he has made himself," says Pyne of the Swiss artist.

But try looking for traces of these influences. "You wouldn't find anything definite," he says. Pyne has moved on, perfecting his own dream-like technique of tempera. He acknowledges other influences — Walt Disney's animation and the art of Abanindranath Tagore. He talks of how the French poet Stephane Mallarme had inspired his *Black Swan*. He talks of Fellini and Tarkovsky, of the Bengali poet Jibanananda Das.

You point out that his paintings

SUDIP ACHARYA

reveal an almost Kafkaesque world of hopelessness, and somewhere in his febrile mind an image stirs — of a little boy beside his grandmother, listening to tales from The Mahabharata. He turns to one of the paintings, *The Assassin*. "Amba seeking Bhishma," says Pyne. It's a deathless, remorseless search for revenge.

It needed another birth and a different gender to assuage that anger. It's his own psychological *angst*, the inescapability of an artist's condition where public tastes dictate the creative process. In layman's terms, it's violation of artistic 'space'.

"Painting is a journey, a long destinationless journey," says Pyne. "I am not satisfied yet." In the smithy of his mind is another image taking shape? Like *The Merchant*, his wares-filled bag slung across his shoulder, making his way to another port...only his shadow stalks him. "That's his ambition," explains Pyne.

Against an inky background, a sullen gravity hangs ominous. Much like *The Hand* — his latest painting — a tortured, headless body in a silent, painful grimace. The severed hand writhes in the unconscious. It's a bleak picture of death, both as a metaphor of hard times and of actual loss.

In painting after painting, Pyne explored the ambiguous, half-lit, half-darkened world of the subconscious where symbols and memories tossed and mingled

In 1965, his grandmother died and with her one certain source of inspiration. Then in the Eighties, his elder brother Kartick died. Pyne was distraught. "I was not prepared to take on the family burden. Even now I am not prepared," he says. In a sense, his brother's death was a twin blow. At one level, it was the pain of separation, the death of someone who was, one can say, his creative anchor. At another level, it meant that now he had to come face-to-face with reality. A cruel twist of fate for an idealistic, thinking dreamer obsessed with his unconscious.

But is Pyne, as we are generally led to believe, all that of a recluse who rarely steps outside his house? Maybe, that too is a myth created around the artist who chose to seek his own creative idiom tapping the almost tangible memories of his past. Pyne himself defines this notion. "When I paint, I merge with my canvas. It's an endless dialogue. But at other times, I am just another normal person." It was an almost reassuring statement.

Perhaps, the confidence has come from recognition — not only in India but abroad as well. Today, Pyne is a happier man. A late marriage to his long-time sweetheart has brought a measure of emotional stability. Though a cerebral attack last year had left him drained for a while, he emerged with enough resolve to carry on.

As a soft, subtle rain drizzled outside on the dust-spattered streets of Calcutta, a small, bespectacled man guided you around the gallery, down the passageways, pausing, explaining, even suggesting what he had tried to convey.

Would anybody else do that? It's irrelevant. What is relevant is the quiet, welcoming warmth of a man unmoved by material ambitions. That's why, despite all the fame and adulation, he has remained the same — an intense, fascinating man, still questing for his mysterious, inviolate self. •

Ananda Kamal Sen/Calcutta

Sridevi and Boney Kapoor really seem to be enjoying the new-found legitimacy that surrounds their relationship. They appear on stage at awards functions, hand in hand looking madly in love with each other. They attend every film party, appearing as if joined at the hip. And in Delhi — where Boney is shooting his latest movie — they are a regular fixture on the social scene, attending everything from art exhibitions to parties thrown by politicians.

And despite her "retirement" from the movies, Sridevi remains as much of a draw as ever. This, despite the fact that she chooses not to play the film star, appearing with minimal make-up and in the most understated of trouser suits.

As they say, once a star always a star.

Pooja Bedi has got back into shape in record time after the birth of her daughter, Alia.

Her waist is as trim as ever, her butt just as pert and...well, we won't go into the rest if it's all the same with you.

So, how does Pooja do it? Well, if you want to know her secret then just buy the book that she has written on the subject.

As for us, we can just let you into one secret. Despite her glowing complexion and perfect figure, Bedi has no intentions of making a comeback into the movies. She's quite content selling bed linen and bringing up baby.

As was expected, Hollywood star, Richard Gere created waves wherever he went in India. While all the Delhi matrons clustered around him like moths around flame, Gere was the toast of Bollywood while in Bombay.

But strangely enough, Richard didn't hit it off with the more serious members of the Hindi *filmi* fraternity. Instead, he got along best with Jackie Shroff (yes, that's right, Jackie Shroff!), who is not exactly known for his high IQ. As they say in America,go figure!

In Delhi, meanwhile filmstar-turned-politician and newly-elected BJP MP Vinod Khanna has become the toast of the town. It is difficult to attend a social occasion without bumping into him and his pretty wife, Kavita.

Needless to say, everyone makes much of Khanna and hangs on to his every word, treating even the most ordinary commonplace as a philosophical statement.

Vinod, for his part, loves every moment of this. •

FOOT IN THE MOUTH

If you have the habit of shooting your mouth off, there's always the danger of saying something silly. At an AIDS awareness programme, Bollywood star Vinod Khanna suddenly said that HIV-positives should be detected in mandatory tests and given identity badges. The Osho commune had similar procedures. "Since sex therapy was a part of the programme, it was essential that all those who entered the commune were tested for AIDS," said Khanna. "Those who tested positive were not banned but given badges."

AFP

Gere and Vinod Khanna: sensitivity syndrome

Nothing wrong in what he said, except that Khanna mixed up a philanthropic programme with what took place in Rajneesh's commune. Predictably, Richard Gere who was present at the launch, was furious. "This is horrific," he said. "AIDS patients need acceptance, not segregation."

LYRICIST SALMAN

Wisdom cometh after folly? After his Islamic gaffe, Salman Rushdie is taking no chances. The latest novel Rushdie is working on is based on the world of rock. His inspiration: the rock band U2 which had once called him onstage during one of its performances.

There's a bonus. The 'much in the news for all the wrong reasons' writer has also composed lyrics for the novel's fictional Rock Star. Sounds interesting. Neutral too.

Rushdie: if music be the food of love...

NOT A NICE MAN TO KNOW

A pain in the neck maybe, but a misogynist? Apparently yes, if Khushwant Singh's latest project is any pointer to his mind. Singh is going to interview 13 women — only women mind you — who are interesting, famous, notorious and have made a difference. His brief: rip them apart before TV cameras. Among those he interviews are Benazir Bhutto and Sheikh Hasina. They'll talk to him about their lives and loves and the encounters will then be shown on Star.

Producer Sadia Dehlvi and her younger brother Waseem, who's the director, say Singh shows surprising felicity for the

Sadia Dehlvi, Persis Khambatta Durrani: with malice towards on

SAXON IMAGERIES

[redacted] Imagine a Brit asking an Indian to speak pro-British. Improbable? Consider this: Tony Blair's new super-duper team to launch the image of 'Cool Britannia' has Swraj Paul on its 33-member panel. The details:

Headed by foreign office minister Derek Fatchett, Panel 2000, hand-picked by Blair, will demonstrate to possible investors the extent to which Britain has shed its colonial ways and is now a modern country. There will be video shows on Gurkhas, Hare Krishna devotees, Professor Stephen Hawkins, and the pop group Oasis.

Others on the panel include Stella McCartney, fashion designer and daughter of ex-Beatle Sir Paul McCartney, and Martin Bell, the former journalist who's now an Independent MP.

Celeb crowd, yes, but Lord Paul has to get busy. Anglo-Saxons, after all, don't make such overtures very often.

Swraj Paul and Blair: colonial cousins?

camera. In the serial's first episode, he makes a hash of former Miss India Persis Khambatta and Pakistani author Tehmina Durrani. But then, they always said he wasn't a nice man to know.

Khwant Singh and Tehmina Durrani

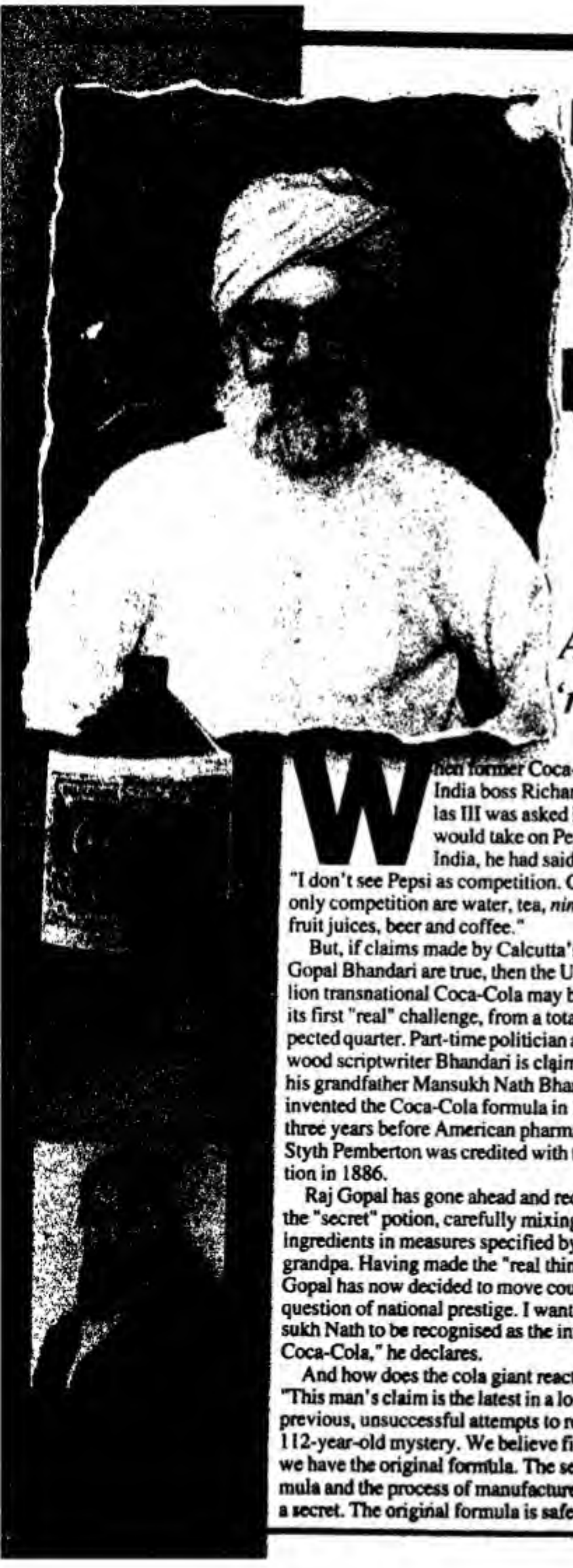
OBSESSED WITH CATS

[redacted] Eccentric fathers do not necessarily beget eccentric sons. Nirad Chaudhuri's son Dhruva Chaudhuri may not be as erudite as his dad, but he is a skilled photographer all the same.

At an exhibition of wildlife photographs in London's Nehru Centre, Chaudhuri presented a slide show of tigers in the wild telling a rapt audience how it was to look a tiger in the eye after waiting long hours on a *machan* in sweltering heat.

Chaudhuri says it was his father's extensive library that had first introduced him to the big cats. The retired mass-com. professor wants to go back into the wilds again. He plans to make a film this time.

Chaudhuri at the exhibition: call of the wild



The Th

A Calcuttan claims that the Coc 'made in India'!

When former Coca-Cola India boss Richard Nicholas III was asked how he would take on Pepsi in India, he had said valiantly: "I don't see Pepsi as competition. Coke's only competition are water, tea, *nimbu paani*, fruit juices, beer and coffee."

But, if claims made by Calcutta's Raj Gopal Bhandari are true, then the US $ 18 billion transnational Coca-Cola may be facing its first "real" challenge, from a totally unexpected quarter. Part-time politician and Bollywood scriptwriter Bhandari is claiming that his grandfather Mansukh Nath Bhandari had invented the Coca-Cola formula in 1883 — three years before American pharmacist John Styth Pemberton was credited with the invention in 1886.

Raj Gopal has gone ahead and recreated the "secret" potion, carefully mixing the ingredients in measures specified by his grandpa. Having made the "real thing", Raj Gopal has now decided to move court. "It is a question of national prestige. I want Mansukh Nath to be recognised as the inventor of Coca-Cola," he declares.

And how does the cola giant react to this? "This man's claim is the latest in a long line of previous, unsuccessful attempts to reveal the 112-year-old mystery. We believe firmly that we have the original formula. The secret formula and the process of manufacture remain a secret. The original formula is safe inside the vault of the Trust Company Bank in downtown Atlanta," a Coca-Cola spokesman in Atlanta told SUNDAY.

Is there a face-off? Is Bhandari afflicted by a bout of *swadeshi* now sweeping the country? Or is he, as pointed out by Coca-Cola, a mere front in the "112-year-old mystery"-revelation game? Whichever way it is, Coca-Cola vs Bhandari promises to be one helluva duel under the scorching summer sun.

It all began in late 1996. One Sunday morning, in his old three-room apartment off central Calcutta's Dharmatala Street, Raj Gopal was busy getting rid of rubbish from a box. The box — a kind of heirloom — contained old papers.

Raj Gopal found letters written by tenants to his father Sohan Lal and to his grandfather. Most of these were about money matters. Raj Gopal had no use for for them, and so decided to throw them away.

In one corner of the box, there was a bunch of papers carefully wrapped in plastic. "What is this, and why has this been preserved so carefully?" wondered Raj Gopal. He unwrapped the packet to find some papers. He also found an old book: *Practical Recipes for the Manufacture of Aerated Beverages, Cordials, Non-alcoholic Brewed Beers, Carbonated Mineral Waters, and other Popular Beverages.*

Raj Gopal kept aside the book and picked up the letters. All, save a few, were in Urdu,

real

NG

Cola formula was

TOP SECRET

X

INGREDIENTS:

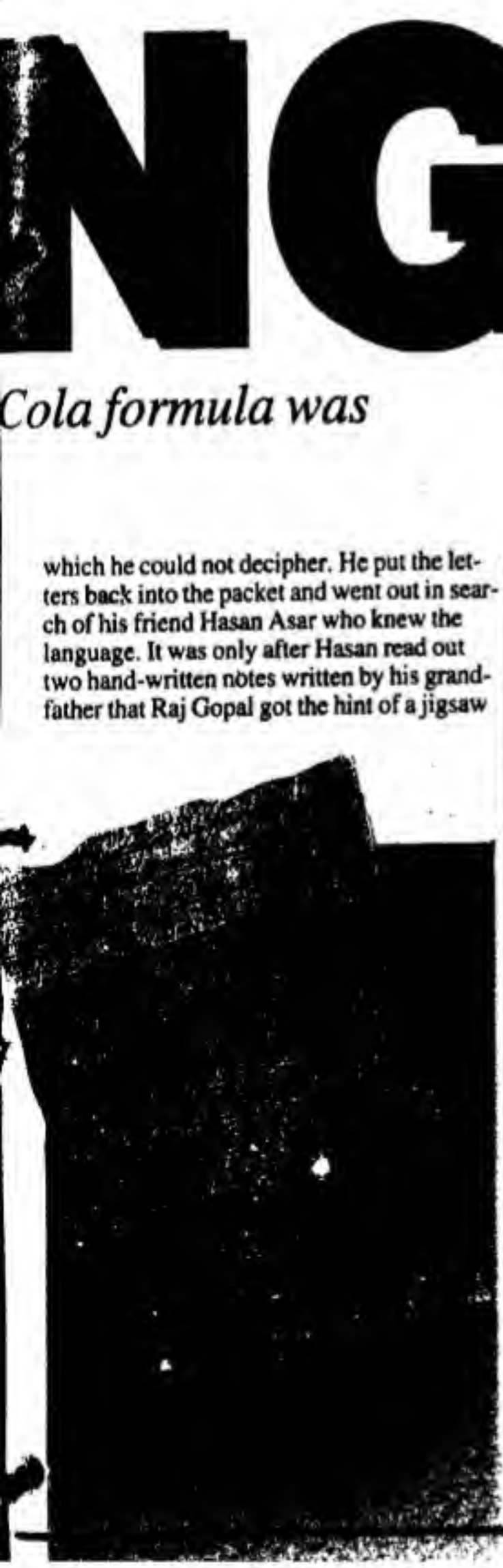
1 oz. Caffeine	3 oz. Citric Acid
1 oz. Ext. Vanilla	1 Qt. Lime Juice
2 1/2 oz. Flavoring	20 lbs. Sugar
4 oz. F.E. Coca	2 1/2 gal. Water
Caramel sufficient	

FLAVORING:

80 Oil Orange	40 Oil Cinnamon
120 Oil Lemon	20 Oil Coriander
40 Oil Nutmeg	40 Oil Neroli
1 Qt. Alcohol	

DIRECTIONS:

Mix Caffeine Acid and Lime Juice 1 Qt. Boiling water add vanilla and flavoring when cool. Let stand for 24 hours.



which he could not decipher. He put the letters back into the packet and went out in search of his friend Hasan Asar who knew the language. It was only after Hasan read out two hand-written notes written by his grandfather that Raj Gopal got the hint of a jigsaw puzzle spanning three generations — and as many continents.

Gradually, Raj Gopal began to piece the puzzle together and realised what his grandfather was talking about. In November 1883, Mansukh Nath wrote to one Akhtar Singh Oberoi: "You will be happy to know that this formula of mine has been selected for the exhibition."

In another note, written on 17 December 1910, Mansukh Nath was in a sombre mood. He observed: "Today I realise that I made a big mistake by giving away my 'coca' formula to W.J. Bush and Co. If there was no aerated water exhibition in Calcutta 27 years back, the formula would have been in my possession today. He now wants to publish the formula which I am against. I may have to go to London in this connection."

What was Mansukh Nath upto? In his 1910 letter, he was talking about an exhibition held 27 years ago. Some big show must have been held in Calcutta in 1883. And displaying his formula there must have been a great honour — the good news which Mansukh Nath wanted to share with Akhtar Singh Oberoi.

Raj Gopal knew nothing about the exhibition. But he could make out what Mansukh Nath was talking about. There was a time when his family had been a big player in the

FACT-FILE

"I can substantiate my claim"

Raj Gopal Bhandari is ready to take on Coca-Cola

SUNDAY: How did you find out about formula?
Raj Gopal Bhandari: I was cleaning up old files. I found a bunch of papers wrapped in plastic. There were old letters, some in English, some written in Urdu. After going through the papers, my friend Hasan Asar, who knew Urdu, told me that they were about some coca formula.

Q: Were you aware of the controversy?
A: I only had faint recollection of my father Sohan Lal Bhandari telling me about it when I was four or five. One day I wanted to have Coca-Cola. My father said, 'Why do want to have Coca Cola? Have Vimto [Vimto was made by Rose & Thistle].' When I kept on nagging him, he made the drink himself and we all had it. That was my earliest recollection about my family's association with the formula.

Q: What did you do after you found the papers?
A: After Hasan deciphered the papers, I made a thorough research of the matter which convinced me that it was my grandfather Mansukh Nath who had invented the formula. Only then I decided to get in touch with Coca-Cola.

Q: How did the formula go from Bush to Pemberton...
A: That is a mystery. Mr Bush had factory in New Jersey and if Pemberton was a famous chemist working in this area then they were likely to know each other.

Q: What do you want to establish now?
A: I want Mansukh Nath Bhandari to be recognised as the inventor of Coca-Cola.

Q: Won't you claim damages from the company?
A: The question of damages is secondary. First, I want my grandfather's recognition.

Q: Are you going to take legal action against Coca-Cola?
A: Most certainly.

Q: Have you written to Coca-Cola about this?
A: My lawyers have written to them. They have sent Coca-Cola legal notices to [illegible]

Q: Have you received the concentrate?
A: Yes I have.

Q: Do you get all the ingredients in India?
A: Some are available. Others have to be imported.

Q: Are these ingredients very expensive?
A: Not at all. The drink is (*laughs*) mostly water, for which they are charging Rs 8. The cost comes to Re 1. They must be using saccarine.

Q: Can you tell me anything about the formula?
A: What do you want...okay...they say Coke contains citric acid. But Coke cannot be made without tartaric acid, though it is forbidden.

Q: Forbidden? Isn't it a food-grade ingredient?
A: It is not advisable to put tartaric acid. Though it is not banned in India, it is not advisable to use. It is harmful. But still they use it. Without tartaric acid, Coca-Cola can't be made. This is my challenge to them. This much I can tell you.

Q: Coca-Cola can sue you on this...
A: On the question of tartaric acid? That they haven't put tartaric acid? They cannot say that. It is the basic point.

Q: Coca-Cola formula has a secret code called 7X, right? What is this 7X?
A: Oh, it refers to the ingredients...one, two, three, four...seven.

Q: So Coke has seven ingredients?
A: Yes, that's what they say. But actually there are five. The formula is often changed. There are five basic ingredients. Some times they add some, some times they take out ingredients. The pres[illegible]

aerated water business. Mansukh Nath was a partner in Rose & Thistle, a company which manufactured soft drinks. Rose & Thistle had factories in Lahore, Delhi and Calcutta and also a lab in Ambala. And his partner in Rose & Thistle was none other than W.J. Bush.

These two letters suggested that Bush may have pulled a fast one on Mansukh Nath, his business associate. And if Bush really did that, it also meant that it was Mansukh Nath — and not John Pemberton — who invented the Coca-Cola formula, one of the world's best-kept secrets for over a century!

But then, two mere chits of paper saying "I invented Coke" meant nothing. Raj Gopal needed corroborative evidence and didn't know where to look.

PRADIP SAHYAL

He [illegible] cutta's National Library. And, there it was. On 4 December 1883, *The Friend of India and Statesman* reported that an international exhibition had indeed been held in Calcutta which was inaugurated "this afternoon, Tuesday, December 4th." The report also stated that a host of eminent citizens, including the viceroy, were showing up for the exhibition.

Raj Gopal immediately dashed off a letter to Coca-Cola CEO, the late Roberto Goizueta, on 23 November 1996, giving a brief outline of who he was and what he had found. He received a letter, dated 9 January, 1997, stating that Coca-Cola was not open to submission of ideas "involving additional ingredients or formula modifications for any products of the company".

Raj Gopal pointed out that he was not adding masala to the Coke formula, but that it belonged to him by way of inheritance. He organised a press conference in Calcutta and his claim was widely reported. But that was

MIX AND MATCH

all. Soon, everything was forgotten. Bhandari then turned to a family friend.

Enter George Fernandes. Raj Gopal recalled that George and his father, Sohan Lal, knew each other well. The Samata Party leader replied to Raj Gopal's letter dated 28 May, 1997, saying that he needed "irrefutable evidence" in support of the claim. Later, after going through the papers, George wrote to Bhandari, in July, advising him about his next course of action: "file a case in a court of law".

Prima facie, there seems to be a strong case. Take Mansukh Nath's credentials: he was from the aerated water industry, running a successful company with a foreign partner. He had his own labs and factories where he developed his various products. He had intimate knowledge of the processes and trends in the industry.

Practical Recipes — the book which Raj Gopal had found in the old box — was published by W.J. Bush and Company. The company, established around 1849, was described as "manufacturing chemists and distillers". It was also an "inventor of soluble essences and dealers in all raw materials requisite for...aerated and fermented non-excisable beverages". In America, the company had branches in New York, New Jersey and Chicago.

W.J. Bush and Company had an impressive track record. It won several gold medals and awards all over the world for product excellence. This also included an award in Calcutta in 1883-84.

There is no doubt about Mansukh Nath's association with W.J. Bush and Company. But the clincher seems to be his detailed handwritten note which spells out the 'coca' potion. This handwritten recipe and the one which appears in *Practical Recipes* are remarkably similar.

Pieces in the jigsaw puzzle now seem to fall into place. In 1883, Mansukh Nath talked about his recipe being chosen for a Calcutta exhibition. Mansukh Nath gave the formula to his partner W.J. Bush who wanted to publish it. But Masukh Nath was dead against it.

"My client is ready to stand any scrutiny"

Declares Naresh Balodia, counsel for Raj Gopal Bhandari

SUNDAY: How did the case come to you?
Naresh Balodia: It was in August 1997, when Mr Raj Gopal Bhandari came to me. I found the case to be quite unique. Initially, I was not very enthusiastic. But as I went through the papers, I became more and more involved.

Q: How strong is the case?
A: I think Raj Gopal Bhandari is basically looking for recognition. He wants to point out the injustice done to his grandfather in the pre-Independence period. Then, the government and the grievance-redressal machinery were geared towards protecting British interests. W.J. Bush was an Englishman. Mansukh Nath claimed that he had invented the formula which he subsequently handed over to W.J. Bush. But Mansukh Nath had very little control over what he invented.

Q: Why did Mansukh Nath give away the formula?
A: It is difficult to say. I think he was seeking recognition as the inventor, a recognition which was difficult to get in those times without an Englishman backing you.

Q: Do you think the claim has merit?
A: That the court will decide. It is premature to comment on that.

Q: Why is this claim different from others?
A: You must look into the background of the person who is making a claim. Anyone can make a claim of possession or invention. Both Mansukh Nath and his son Sohan Lal were associated with the aerated water trade. They had their own factories. Mansukh Nath was no stranger to the profession. These are strong circumstantial evidences.

Q: Did Mansukh Nath have laboratories where he could undertake research?
A: I can't disclose that now.

Q: What will be your plea?
A: First and foremost, we will try to esta-

Coca-Cola returns to India: drink and be merry

blish Mansukh Nath Bhandari as the inventor of the formula for Coca-Cola, which all these years has been kept a closely-guarded secret in order to deprive him.

Q: Will you be seeking a stay order on the sale of Coca-Cola products?
A: We will be asking for whatever interlocutary relief that heirs of Mansukh Nath Bhandari should get.

Q: Will you be moving Calcutta High Court in this regard?
A: I can't disclose at this stage when and where we will move. All I can tell you is that we will be moving court very soon. We have already done the groundwork.

Q: What is Coca-Cola's position?
A: They are saying that there were many people who claim that they are in possession of the formula and all such claims have turned out to be bogus.

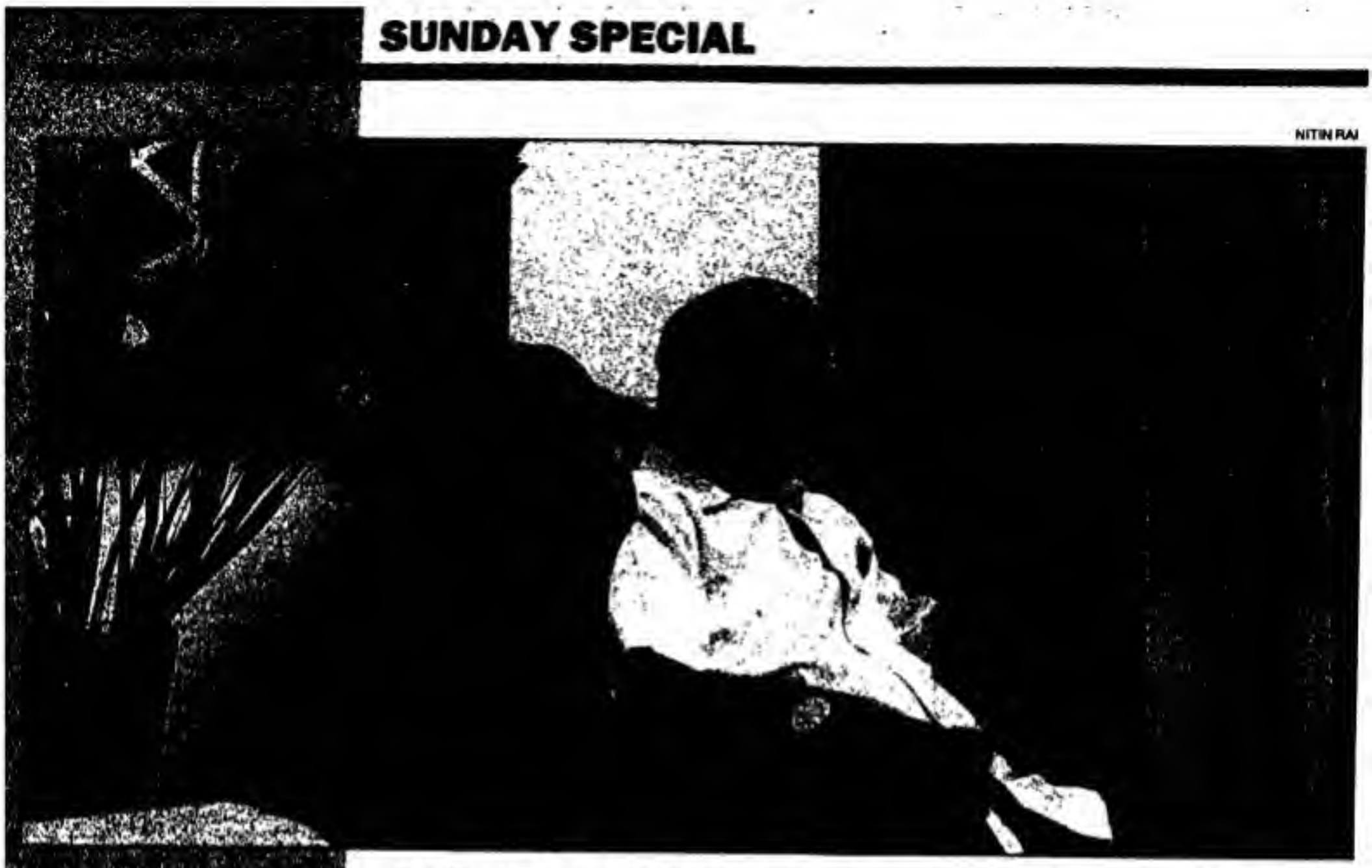
Q: Does Raj Gopal Bhandari's claim boil down the disclosure of the secret formula?
A: There is no question of disclosure. All my client is saying that he is already in possession of the formula. He is fighting for the recognition of Mansukh Nath Bhandari.

Q: But there will be the question of

A: Yes, those things are there, but damages relate to secondary relief. Primary relief relates to the question of invention.

Q: The papers found by Bhandari could be forged. Have you established their genuineness?
A: Yes I have. Whether the papers are genuine or not can be tested in a lab if the court directs. My client is ready to stand any scrutiny that the court may order.

Q: Are you confident of winning the case?
A: Yes. It may take time, but my client is definitely going to win. •



NITIN RAI

The 'inventor' later found his formula in *Practical Recipes*, published by his partner for restricted circulation in the aerated water trade. In the book, Bush claimed that it was *he* who had "introduced" the highly-acclaimed "coca" essence. There was, of course, no mention of Mansukh Nath.

Where does that leave Atlanta pharmacist John Pemberton, the official inventor of Coca-Cola? Now it appears that three years before he came up with The Formula, the recipe for 'coca' essence had already been displayed in Calcutta and had then appeared *in print* in London (*Practical Recipes*).

It is also clear that Pemberton never realised the commercial implications of his potion. In fact, he never lived to see "his" invention becoming the icon of a new world order. Being a pharmacist, Pemberton may have hawked Coca-Cola as a cough syrup. "Coca-Cola was sold initially as a cough syrup in American drugstores," reveals Ramesh Chauhan, who sold his highly-successful Thums Up to Coca-Cola, after the latter returned to India in 1993.

The cloak of secrecy added value and exclusivity to the brand. On that was built a commercial empire like none before. "The Coke formula is successful because of the huge effort to market it," points out Chauhan.

It is this exclusivity that Raj Gopal Bhandari is challenging. And his legal adviser Naresh Balodia is confident that the stand taken by his client will be vindicated. "Coke is simply evading the question of 'invention'. They are harping on the claims of 'possession' and 'knowledge' about the formula. Our plea is on the invention. It is a question of national prestige and we will go till the very end," says Balodia.

What could be the fallout of the legal battle? The court can very well brush aside the claim if it feels there is no prima facie case. But, what if the judges think otherwise?

In that event, there could even be a restraint on the sale of Coca-Cola India products, till the case is decided. Moreover, there could be a demand to reveal the Coke formula. Without this, it cannot be established that the recipe recreated by Raj Gopal from his grandfather's old papers is identical — or different — from Coke's secret formula.

That may be the reason why Coca-Cola is silent on the question of 'invention', and is branding Bhandari's claim as a mere case of 'posseesion' or 'knowledge' of the formula. Replying to SUNDAY's queries, Dexter Brookes, Coca-Cola's senior staff counsel (legal division), clarified: "For nearly a century, there have been claims by people that they have the secret formula. None of them has proven to be true. We have no reason to believe that this current claim has any validity whatsoever."

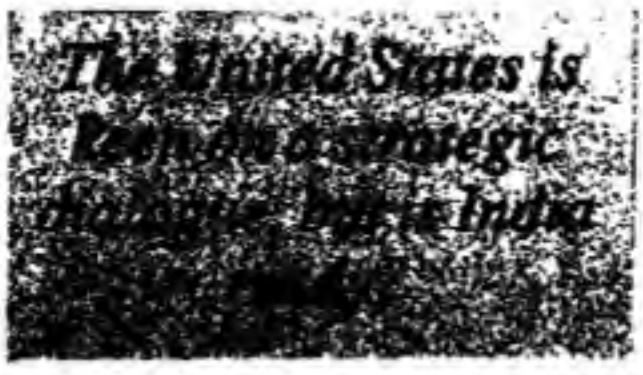
But the "current claim" is not about "having" the formula. It's about a voice from the past saying: "I made the stuff and my partner stole it from me". •

Sourabh Sen/Calcutta with Shrabani Basu/London

Bill Richardson's visit, accompanied by Karl Inderfurth and Bruce Riedel, was considered 'pivotal' by the Americans. It was the first step in shaping the agenda for Clinton's long-awaited trip now expected in November

Diplomatic overtures

When President Bill Clinton called Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee by telephone to congratulate him, it was yet another sign that Washington wanted to pursue a more active relationship with New Delhi. Both leaders emphasised the positive; stressed cooperation and looked to the future. Clinton sent his personal envoy last fortnight to establish closer contact with the BJP-led coalition and assess



how best to move the relationship forward.

Bill Richardson, the US ambassador to the United Nations, went to India and took the pulse, measured the temperature and resumed the dialogue curtailed by the fall of the United Front government. He was accompanied by Karl Inderfurth, assistant secretary of state for South Asia, and Bruce Riedel, senior director in the National Security Council at the White House.

The visit was considered 'pivotal' by the Americans in that it sought to engage the new government to figure out its thinking. It was also the first step in shaping the agenda for Clinton's long-awaited

trip, now expected in November after two postponements. US officials are eager to get things going with India and overcome the periodic mood swings that seem to afflict both capitals.

Riding the roller-coaster of Indo-US relations has never been easy for those who want the relationship to grow, mature, and eventually flower. The painful cresting through hard work and the sudden subsiding into studied nonchalance has sapped many an enthusiast in the past, giving fodder to the determined hardliners.

The 'strategic dialogue' initiated last year has languished since November when secretary of state Madeleine Albright visited New Delhi and raised India's profile in American policy-making. The rare trip was flanked by similar forays by an array of US Cabinet members to help broaden and deepen the relationship — the main objective of the 'strategic dialogue' as understood by the Clinton administration.

But between Albright's trip and Richardson's visit, there was a four-month diplomatic vacuum of sorts as Indian officials kept a distance until a new government was in place. Americans called it 'a desert' when even the most routine exchange failed. Indian officials, always weary of being 'too active' specially where the Americans are concerned, simply waited. It is Inderfurth's specific task to rejuvenate the dialogue, begin building on where the two sides left off, and craft and draft a policy that will form the backbone of Clinton's trip. Riedel will be the channel to the White House where one of India's best friends resides in the shape of Hillary Clinton.

There has been a perception gap on what the 'strategic dialogue' is supposed to deliver. Americans devised it to have some *real* exchange with India instead of reading to each other the known positions on known topics — nuclear non-proliferation, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), export controls and Kashmir. Having realised that India and the United States have never really talked *with* each other and always *at* each other, they concluded there was merit in engagement.

Strategic dialogue is not conceived as an alliance against any country (read China), US officials stress, nor is it a mechanism for quid pro quos. It is an attempt to get to know Indian thinking better, to exchange some real information and understand the mindset so that a more mature friendship can grow in the future. Americans say it is difficult to perceive India as a partner yet because of the history of troubled bilateral relations over decades.

For the Americans it is important that the Vajpayee government lasts so that at least some business can be done. Frequent changes only convey a sense of insecurity

ROUGH EDGES

Irritants to a relationship

- **Washington's balancing act between India and Pakistan. America's refusal to openly condemn Pakistan's role in terrorism is cause of much heartburn in South Block.**

- **Indian policy makers see a ploy in America's refusal to outrightly back India's case for a permanent seat in the Security Council. They feel that Americans do not really want expansion but are content to watch the diplomatic bloodletting from the sidelines.**

- **The Americans, on their part, say that India at the United Nations is a difficult pill to swallow as it votes even fewer times than Iran and Iraq on issues close to Washington's heart.**

But active diplomacy, if reciprocated by New Delhi, could lead to better and brighter days. Indian officials seem bemused by the concept of strategic dialogue, but not excited. They are still trying to figure out if there is any real 'meat' there. Two different approaches to diplomacy might be at work here — the gradualist (an American favourite these days) where you build brick by brick, and the 'Show-me' school where a significant gesture is required to push the relationship into a qualitatively better realm.

Indian diplomats are not fully convinced about American intentions and can't help but feel irritated at Washington's balancing act between India and Pakistan. The American refusal to openly condemn Pakistan's role in terrorism causes much heartache in South Block. The carefully bland statements only strengthen the belief that for Washington, the two neighbours are on a par. But instead of waiting for the grand American gesture, India would be better served if the diplomats churned out some new ideas and initiatives of their own instead of merely reacting.

On the balance sheet of grievances, Indian policy makers also see a ploy in the American refusal to outrightly back India's case for a permanent seat in the

UN Security Council. The plea that Americans do not want to take sides among various regional candidates does not wash with New Delhi. It just strengthens the belief that the Americans do not really want expansion but are content to watch the diplomatic bloodletting from the sidelines. If they really want something, they push, prod and punish countries until they get it.

Richardson, the man entrusted with the task of sorting out the American position, must have got an earful from his Indian counterparts. For the Americans, India at the United Nations is a difficult pill to swallow since it votes even fewer times than Iran and Iraq on issues close to Washington's heart.

The sound bites from the CTBT debate still ring loud, specially for those sections of the State Department whose very existence depends on forcing India to sign. The arms controllers in the State Department led by John Holum, under secretary for international security affairs, are in a constant tussle to gain the upper hand and deny India any favours until it changes its stand on the nuclear question.

There are many who reject this regressive line of thinking because it has already failed. They are the ones trying to create a more substantive dialogue with India, so small favours can be justified. A key person in this bureaucratic tussle is Thomas Pickering, the third-highest official within the State Department and a former ambassador to India. He is keen to develop a broader relationship with India despite the differences.

For its part, Washington has been striking the right notes since the BJP coalition came to power, praising its 'national agenda' for its breadth of vision and its attempt to be inclusive rather than exclusive. US officials praise Vajpayee, a leader they have cultivated over the years.

In fact, Frank Wisner, the former US ambassador to India, made it a point to sustain and unclog the channels to the BJP as it waited in the wings, holding long and substantive meetings with the top leaders. He has been on record as saying that the BJP was a "democratic and nationalist" party, not a Hindu nationalist party. State Department officials have been equally effusive in their response. One senior official said that he did not expect any "downs" in the relationship. "We have been struck by the BJP's efforts to be reassuring. We think we can work well with the BJP on all issues," he said.

Behind the warm and fuzzy feelings for a party whose book has some significant dark chapters is a fervent American hope for longevity of the Indian government — any government — so that some business can be done. The frequent changes convey a sense of political instability no matter how often every new minister may stress continuity. Washington wants to get out of the 'wait-and-see' mode. Will Vajpayee oblige? •

Seema Sirohi/Washington

THE PROTAGONISTS

Frank Wisner: The former ambassador to India made it a point to sustain and unclog the channels to the BJP as it waited in the wings, holding long and substantive meetings with the top leaders. He has even said that the BJP was a "democratic and nationalist" party, not a Hindu nationalist party.

DISTANT

The Samata-BJP combine targets Laloo and Rabri in a bid to bring down the RJD government in Bihar. But the Yadav is yet to relent

George Fernandes (left) and Nitish Kumar: waiting to strike

Yashwant Sinha (centre) at Rabri Devi's office: sifting the files

They got together to beat Laloo Prasad Yadav & Co. in the Lok Sabha elections. And they succeeded. This time, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Samata Party have ganged up once again to bring down Laloo Prasad Yadav's wife and Bihar chief minister, Rabri Devi. They are making a hullabaloo over the fodder scam and other scams that took place when Yadav was the chief minister.

In fact, they've been baying for the state government's blood ever since there was a change of guard and Rabri Devi stepped into the shoes (read chappals) of her husband as the chief minister.

Will they succeed this time? Going by the current scenario, there's little room for speculation unless there's a dramatic turn of events.

The BJP is represented by Union finance minister Yashwant Sinha, who won from Hazaribagh, and minister of state for forest and environment Babulal Marandi, who beat Jharkhand Mukti Morcha supremo Shibu Soren at his home turf, Dumka.

The Samata Party is represented in the Union Cabinet by party president George Fernandes, who has been bestowed with defence, and the state chief, Nitish Kumar, who got the railway ministry.

Soon after their swearing-in at Delhi, Fernandes and Kumar visited Bihar. Breathing fire against Laloo and Rabri, they remarked that there was total anarchy in the state. "*Yahan aatank ka raaj hai. Is aatank ke raaj ko samapt karna hoga* (There's a reign of terror here, which must be put to an end)," said Kumar at the Sri Krishna Memorial Hall, where he and Fernandes were being felicitated.

Even while the state unit of the Samata Party is rabid in its demand for invoking Article 356 to dismiss the Rabri Devi government, Yashwant Sinha sang a different tune. Sinha contends that "the Rabri Devi-led Rashtriya Janata Dal government in the state is all set to die a natural death". He made it clear that the Centre would not act in haste.

However, Sinha lambasted the state government for its inefficiency: "*Yeh pure desh ki sab se nikammi sarkar hai* (This is the most inefficient government in the country)." On imposition of President's Rule he said, "There is not one reason but a thousand. How this government will go, the BJP will surely ponder over."

Besides venting his ire over the state of affairs, Sinha also attacked Laloo. He charged, "Laloo Yadav has been insulting Bihar not only in the country, but in the whole world," and added, "*Bihar mein keval ek parchhain ko kursi par baitha diya gaya hai* (A shadow has been installed in the chair in Bihar)."

This was Sinha's first visit to the state and his constituency after assuming charge in New Delhi. Shedding all inhibitions, he was highly sarcastic about the antics of the former chief minister and the RJD president, Laloo Prasad Yadav. "Though the state Assembly is free from

THUNDER

راشد صدیق

Laloo, we at Delhi have to bear him now," he said. He added that Laloo is a matter of shame for all Biharis due to his antics and utterances in Parliament. "*Log hum se kahte hain ke kya yehi aapka CM tha? Hum sharm se sar jhuka lete hain* (People ask us, 'Was this man your CM?' We hung our heads in shame)."

Laloo, wily as ever, is out to create confusion in the Samata rank and file. But some Samata MPs may be using their secret liaisons with him as a ploy to get ministerial berths at the Centre

On the other hand, the Samata Party seems to be united over the disposal of the Rabri government — tactfully though. Having jumped into the fray and formed an alliance with the BJP on a one-point programme — '*Laloo hatao Bihar bachao*' — the Samata is playing safe enough to roll the ball on to BJP's court.

The national general secretary of the party, Shivanand Tiwary, told SUNDAY that the party was gearing up for the Rabri government's dismissal. "Very soon," said Tiwary, "we will come up with a watertight case suitable for the implementation of Article 356 in Bihar."

State Samata chief Nitish Kumar, too, is of the view that the RJD government should go. "Personally, I feel that no government exists in the state as far as law and order and economic develop-

ment are concerned," said Kumar.

He however pointed out that his party would not mount any pressure on the Centre for the dismissal of the Bihar government. "The dismissal is fully dependent on Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his council of ministers."

This is in contrast to what the state leaders of the Samata Party have stressed upon. The state unit is compiling a charge sheet against the RJD government to be handed over to Vajpayee this month. Henceforth, pressure on the Centre would be mounted by the party's state unit. This is likely to cause embarrassment to the Vajpayee government.

Speaking of embarrassment, the BJP's state unit has also decided to join the agitation that will be launched from the third week of May. K.N. Govindacharya, the party general secretary and in charge of Bihar, said, "Law and order does not exist at all. Financial bunglings have further aggravated the scenario. Rs 2,000 crore is going away just to pay the interest against the debts and loans taken by the state annually."

Meanwhile, Fernandes, without losing a moment, chose to make the people and party workers aware of the fact that the Vajpayee government's survival would be at stake if Article 356 was implemented in Bihar. It may be noted that one of its supporters, the Telugu Desam Party, is opposed to the use of its provision. However, he promised the "rule of law" in the state "very soon".

The Samata Party, founded in Octo-

Sushil Modi: gaining more weightage within the party

SEARED SAFFRON

[illegible] in the state BJP comes to the fore

[illegible] the same process was likely to be followed for the election of a new State president.

On the other hand, the lobby favouring the re-election of Ashwini [illegible] led by Yashodanand Singh, [illegible] that it should be done [illegible] election and not nomination. [illegible] the 'forged' letter came into [illegible]. And the lobby support- [illegible] demanded action [illegible]

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SANJAY KUMAR

ber 1994 after a split in the Janata Dal, gained abundant ground thereafter. It suffered a setback in the 1995 Assembly elections in which Laloo Prasad swept the polls.

Subsequently, Samata forged an alliance with the BJP and contested the 1996 Lok Sabha elections. The alliance gave Laloo a run for his money in Bihar. The rest of the damage was caused by another split in the JD, this time at Laloo's behest.

Considered a party attached to the ground, Samata attracted people fed up with 'Yadavisation' of the Dal and later of the RJD in Bihar. Ironically, if the RJD has been accused of being a party of Yadavs, then the other strong backward caste, the Kurmis, provide the main bulwark of the Samata Party.

But there is a new element. The minorities and the most backward castes — equally important constituents of Laloo Prasad's social justice vote-bank — also switched their loyalties.

The election for the Patna Lok Sabha seat proved it. The Muslim disenchantment with Laloo continues to grow. For them, curbing communal riots is "part and parcel of the administration. So, Laloo has no right to consider us eternally obliged to him".

The very idea of providing a 'stable' government with a 'clean man' Atal Behari Vajpayee at the helm of affairs has also helped Samata Party gain considerable ground. Moreover, the spate of scams marred the prospects of RJD and Laloo.

The BJP state unit seems to be divided into two camps. While one is headed by former state chief Ashwini Kumar, the other owes its allegiance to K.N. Govindacharya (centre)

But Laloo, wily as ever, is out on the prowl creating confusion in the rank and file of the Samata Party, allege its leaders. In a significant development, Laloo has held a closed-door meeting with veteran SP leader Abdul Gafoor, a former chief minister and present MP of Gopalganj at an inspection bungalow.

With this, the infighting in the Samata came to the fore. Shivanand Tiwary denounced the move. According to sources, Gafoor, the lone Muslim MP in the Samata, was hoping to be included in the central ministry owing to his seniority.

Insiders claim that Laloo Prasad sympathised with Gafoor over his non-inclusion in the ministry. A state leader of the RJD said that Laloo's game plan was to capitalise on similar grievances of many Samata leaders. Sources, however, say that this is a mere ploy on the part of these MPs to increase their chances of inclusion in the ministry.

Trouble also seems to be brewing within the BJP. The state unit seems to be divided into two camps. One is headed by former state chief Ashwini Kumar, while the other owes its allegiance to Govindacharya. And infighting has surfaced over the election of the state president. The seat has fallen vacant after Yashwant Sinha became Union minister.

As far as the RJD is concerned, it still stands united. But the Mardi faction of the JMM proposes to withdraw support from the government on the charge that it was deceived by Laloo in the Lok Sabha elections.

Thus, with the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Samata Party breathing down its neck, the future is not so sound for the RJD. •

Naved Zahir/Patna

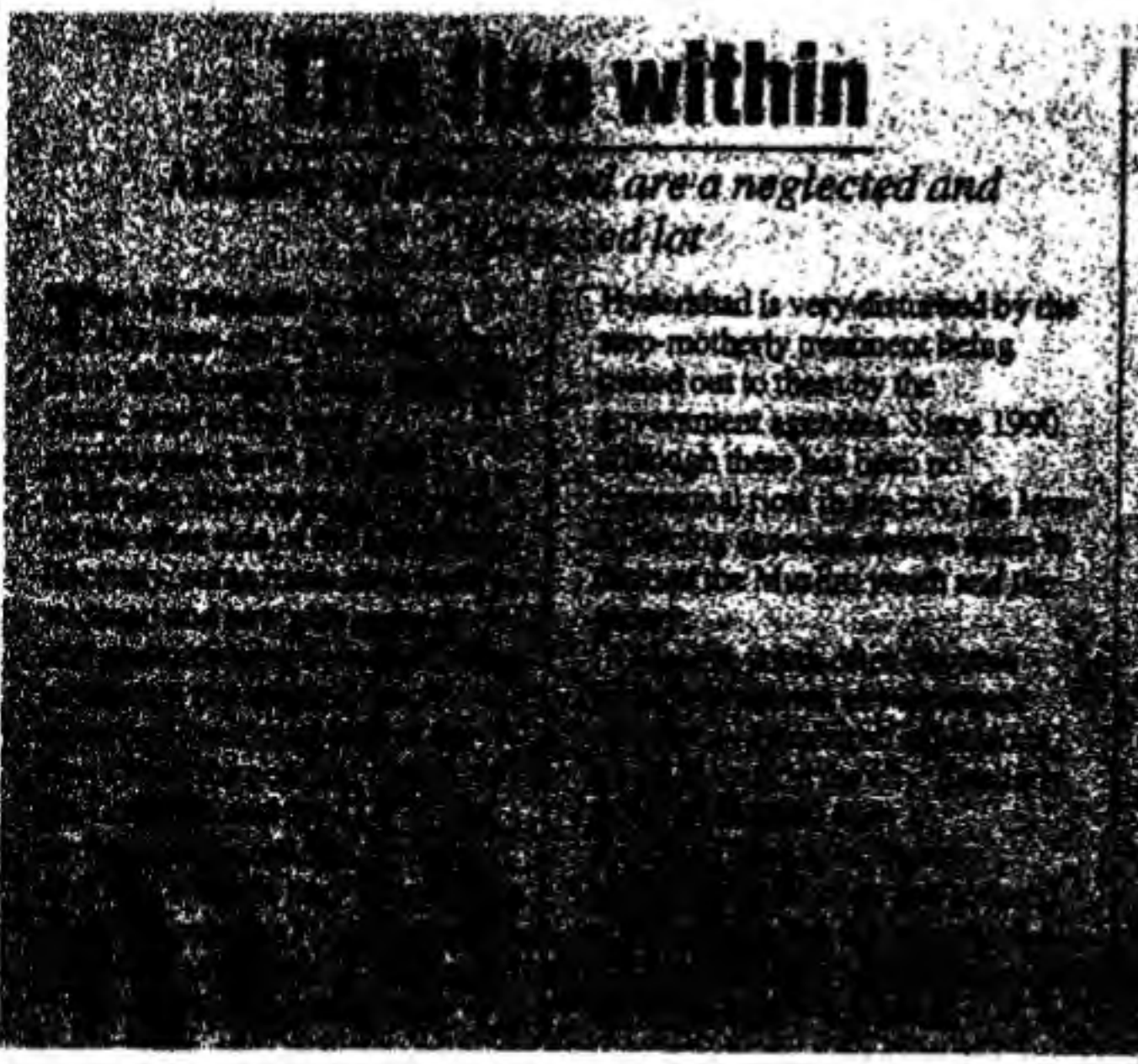
Sense of Betrayal

Muslims in Andhra Pradesh no longer trust chief minister Chandrababu Naidu

When Nara Chandrababu Naidu became the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh and Telugu Desam Party (TDP) supremo, minorities in Andhra Pradesh had found a new messiah. They believed here was a man who would look after their interests and will not neglect the Muslims like his predecessors. But within two years (1996-1998), Muslims in Andhra Pradesh have become a disgruntled and disillusioned community. And the last straw was Naidu's decison to go with the BJP after the 1998 elections. Today, Naidu has lost the faith of the Muslims and there is trouble in his own party where the minority leaders are openly revolting against his leadership.

"The TDP and the Congress have bared their true colours after enjoying our support," said Sayyed Mohammed, a legislator of the Majlis-Bachao-Tahreek (MBT). Today, the educated Muslims feel that Naidu should have been more "transparent" in his moves and not taken the Muslims for a ride. "We have been supporting the TDP because we believed that it stood as a barrier between the communal BJP and the corrupt Congress. Now, we cannot trust the TDP at all," said Abdul Wahabuddin, a government college lecturer.

The first sign of the growing Muslim resentment came to the surface when Basheeruddin Babukhan, the major industries minister of AP, resigned from Naidu's Cabinet a day after the BJP-led coalition at the Centre won the vote of



within

are a neglected and

ed lot

Hyderabad is very disturbed by the step-motherly treatment being meted out to them by the government agencies. Since 1990

(Hindus) do not wish to see us prosper. They always want to see us in tatters and our houses in ruins," said an angry Mohammed Arif Khan, a police sub-inspector in the city.

Arif Khan is not wrong when he says that only Muslim areas are marked for such disposition. [illegible]

confidence. Babukhan was displeased by the manner in which Naidu had bailed the BJP out on the floor of the House.

The Muslims distanced themselves from Naidu ever since he began to tilt towards the BJP. Muslims couldn't believe that this was the same person who had shared a common platform with the minority leaders to campaign against the BJP.

denied to watch it on the ground
that the PTV (Pakistan TV) always
aired anti-Indian propaganda.
"How many times and how

Chandrababu Naidu: alienating the Muslims

Thereafter, Babukhan and TDP general secretary Lal Jan Pasha met Naidu and apprised him of the situation. But to no avail. Perhaps, Naidu failed to fathom that Babukhan's resignation was just the beginning of a series of such acts. Soon after Babukhan resigned, a majority of the TDP's minority cell leaders submitted their papers to their chief. But the worst blow for Naidu was the resignation of a former TDP Rajya Sabha member, Khallelur Rahman. A respected leader, Rahman's resignation caused immense damage to the image of the TDP.

Before the 1996 parliamentary polls, Naidu told the Muslims in a meeting: "Treat me as your brother, we are one." And to drive his message home, he even launched a policy for the advancement of the minorities in AP. And just before the polls, in order to appease the Muslims, Naidu provided them with several important positions — vice-presidentship of the TDP, a Rajya Sabha seat, a Cabinet post and a vice-chancellorship. This was a calculated move and it paid off in the polls.

During the 1998 general elections, Naidu promised the Muslim community that he would give Rs 5 crore to the Wakf Board for repairing the dilapidated mosques in the state. A Cabinet sub-committee was also formed to consider the 26 points raised by a delegation that met Naidu before the polls. The Puttuswamy Commission looking into the backward classes categorisation was asked to include Muslims as a backward class.

After all, Naidu couldn't afford to alienate the Muslims, who constitute nearly 8.6 per cent of the population in AP. The nearly 60 lakh Muslims hold the balance of power in almost 100 Assembly segments and 12 Lok Sabha seats. And the strength of the Muslims is most visible in the Telengana and Rayalseema region of the state.

This time round, the Muslim voters in Telengana numbering around 22 lakhs were instrumental in returning nine TDP candidates to the Lok Sabha. "But for our support and of the Left in the districts of Khammam and Nalgonda, the TDP would have been reduced to a single digit party in the Lok Sabha," said Amanullah Khan, the MBT leader. The Muslim population in Rayalaseema is around 14 lakhs and in coastal Andhra Pradesh about 12 lakhs. While Muslim voters of Rayalaseema and coastal Andhra voted moderately for the TDP, it was the minority voters of the Telengana that ensured TDP's success this time.

Muslim leaders had campaigned very hard in Telengana and Rayalseema region to ensure victory for the TDP candidates. But all that now seems to have gone in vain. The Muslims feel dejected and believe that Naidu had let them down. "He made promises to us, only to break after the polls," said a minority leader.

The Muslim psyche in Andhra Pradesh can be understood by the MIM leader, Sultan Salauddin Owaisi's outburst in Parliament when he described Naidu as a 'chameleon'. "He crawls and hugs you when he wants anything done. And when he doesn't need you, Naidu will not even give you an appointment," said his son Asaddudin Owaisi, who replaced Salauddin in the Assembly. •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

Paradise Revisited

Unless peace returns to the Valley, Farooq Abdullah will not be able to revive the tourism industry in J&K

The timing: perfect. The occasion: the three-day conference on domestic tourism in India organised by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (Assocham). The venue: Sher-e-Kashmir International Convention Centre (SKICC) on the banks of Dal Lake in Srinagar, where over 300 delegates (including travel agents, industrialists, foreigners, travel-media experts and government officials from all over the country) participated in the conference. The Jammu and Kashmir chief minister, Dr Farooq Abdullah, couldn't have found a better platform to declare his ambitious plans to revive the tourism industry in the state.

Over the years, the menace of militancy in J&K has prevented the tourists from coming to the 'Paradise on earth'. And this has been a great blow to the J&K economy because tourism is its major industry, which not only contributes heavily to the state coffers but also provides employment to the local people.

On 4 April, desperate to put the industry back into the rails, Farooq Abdullah announced that the state government would set up a casino at the new tourist resort of Kud, near Patni Top on the Srinagar-Jammu National Highway, and a Multiplex Cinema with five movie halls at Sonawar in Srinagar, to attract tourists to the Valley. Moreover, Abdullah is also trying to impress upon the central government to hold most of its national-level conferences in Srinagar, so that a "strong message is sent across to the people all over the globe": that everything is normal in Kashmir.

In the three-day conference, appropriately called "Back to Paradise", the participants expressed eagerness to restore the once-flourishing tourism industry in the state. They urged the state government to develop proper infrastructural facilities to handle the tourist traffic. And also suggested that immediate measures should be taken to promote the scenic beauty of Kashmir, worldover.

But can all these measures and Abdullah's enthusiasm revive the tourism industry in J&K? No, because the problem lies elsewhere. Media blitzkrieg and construction of cinema complexes and resorts won't bring back tourists to Kashmir. "Kashmir is a name that does not need any promotion. What needs to be done is to bring back peace in the Valley. Only peace can revive the ailing tourism industry," said M.A. Khan, president of the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce.

Local people say that Farooq Abdullah's government has done very little to revive tourism in Kashmir

The threat perception in Srinagar was evident by the nature of security measures taken to ensure safety for the participating delegates. The conference was held under tight security. The civilian movement around the SKICC was strictly restricted over a radius of 2 km. Even mediapersons were not allowed to cover the conference without valid security passes.

No wonder, the conference created very little excitement among the local

A rally in front of Dal Lake: paradise lost

people. Even today, the people associated with the local tourism industry firmly believe that unless there is complete peace in the Valley, the tourists will not risk to visit Kashmir.

In fact, the tourism industry in Kashmir has taken severe body blows in the past eight years of militancy. While one American was mysteriously killed in Srinagar, a Norwegian was kidnapped and beheaded in the Pahalgam woods. And the fate of four other Western tourists abducted in Pahalgam in July 1985 still remains unknown. In 1996, six domestic tourists from Jaipur and Allahabad were shot dead in Dal Lake, an incident that has left an indelible scar. And to make matters worse, almost all Western countries have asked their people not to visit J&K. And even some Indian embassies in European countries are reported to have advised tourists to avoid Kashmir.

So what makes Abdullah confident? In the last couple of years, the situation in the Valley has improved. There has been a considerable decline in militancy. Nowadays, you no longer see militants openly brandishing their AKs and KKs on the streets of Srinagar. The towns like Anantnag, Baramullah and Sopore have also been cleared of militants. But the Valley — which is the main attraction for the tourists — 'officially' still remains a "disturbed area" and the security forces enjoy the special powers to curb militancy.

The city of Srinagar is thick with security bunkers. And securitymen with fingers on their triggers can be seen everywhere in the city. None of the government officials consider the environment to be normal. The killings continue with impunity and the police issue handouts every evening carrying details of "encounters" and "killings".

At least, 50-odd "Tourist Bungalows" are still being occupied by security forces. Even the beautiful Kokernag Garden is under the control of the BSF and is out of bounds for the tourists and the local people. The once-bustling Tourist Reception Centre (TRC) has been transformed into a residential camp for the government officials and a parking place for the security troops.

All this definitely is not good for the tourists' psyche. And this was rightly pointed out by one of the delegates in the conference: "Security personnel positioned on roadsides and bunkers should not display their weapons." Though the suggestion did not evoke any response, it definitely summed up the security scenario in the Valley. "It looks good to move with security and organise a conference under the shadow of police and paramilitary personnel. But until I am hundred per cent sure that normalcy has returned to the Valley, I will never advise anybody to visit Kashmir," said a delegate.

Apart from security hazards, local people also blame the government officials for the present state of the tourism industry. They complain that the state government has done very little to revive the industry. According to some businessmen, the state tourism department officials discourage tourists to visit the Valley. But then you can't really blame them.

Government officials, too, have their own valid reasons. A middle-rung officer in the tourism department admitted that they at times deliberately discourage tourists from visiting health resorts like Pahalgam, Duksum, Yusmarg and other mountainous areas. "See, what happened in Pahalgam? So many foreign tourists were abducted. How can we encourage tourists to visit such vulnerable areas?" he asked.

Even senior government bureaucrats feel the same way. As a senior J&K bureaucrat pointed out that the government has a very little role to play in reviving the tourism industry. Because, the "militants are still calling the shots in the Valley". He recalled the killing of 23 Kashmiri Pandits at Wandhama in Ganderbal in January 1998 and said that unless the separatist, political and militant leaders prevent such acts, no one can revive the tourism industry in J&K.

Travel agents, however, hold the media responsible. They feel that instead of playing down the militancy in the Valley, the media has over the years unnecessarily highlighted the actions and statements made by the militants. And this, to a great extent, had a negative impact on the tourism industry.

However, the separatist forces maintain that unless the issue of Kashmir is resolved according to the aspirations of the Kashmiri people, instability and conflict will continue. And the paradise will remain abandoned. •

Rashid Ahmed/Srinagar

Lt-Gen. A.A.K. Niazi signing the surrender document

Birth Of A Nation

Extracts from Lt-Gen. A.A.K. Niazi's book, The Betrayal Of East Pakistan, *on the 1971 Bangladesh War*

After suffering the humiliation of defeat and surrender, Lt-Gen A.A.K. Niazi returned to Pakistan on 30 April, 1974. Twenty eight months in an Indian Prisoner of War camp had not mellowed Tiger Niazi, who fought a war in East Pakistan in 1971 he was destined to lose. Greater humiliation was to follow when on crossing the Wagah border, a Pakistani brigadier stuck a placard marked 'No. 1' around Niazi's neck. "Even in India we had not been subject to such humiliation," he records in his no-holds-barred, recently released book, The Betrayal of East Pakistan .

This was not the end of his agonising return to Pakistan where according to him, his predecessors in East Pakistan, then Lt-Gen. Tikka (Butcher) Khan was the Chief of Army Staff. Along with Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, he arranged this Traitor No. 1 reception for Niazi and more disgraceful events in Lahore.

Although this is not recorded in his book, an Indian Army contingent of retired officers visiting Lahore two years ago was told of how Niazi was paraded through the streets of Lahore with a garland of shoes around his neck. He became a recluse and virtually inaccessible, till he was rehabilitated during the Presidency of Gen Zia-ul-Haq. It was then that he began blaming Bhutto for letting down the army in East Pakistan.

It is not surprising that in his book first published by the Oxford University Press (Karachi) earlier this year, Niazi has demanded a fresh inquiry into the '1971 debacle' where he says he was made the scapegoat for the loss of East Pakistan. He also alleges that the Hamood-ur-Rehman Commission appointed in 1971 had limited terms of reference, its original report doctored and never made public.

In the introduction to his book, he has demolished other Pakistani versions of the 1971 war for non-factoring the interplay between the war in the West and the war in the East, the nature of tasks given to him and his achievements despite military and political handicaps.

He gives a vivid account of General Tikka Khan's killing spree in East Pakistan on the night of 25-26 March, 1971, describing the brutality as a display of stark cruelty more merciless than the massacres at the Bukhara and Baghdad by Chengiz Khan and Halaku Khan or at Jallianwallah Bagh by British General Dyer.

Niazi's book has opened a Pandora's box in Pakistan and will, no doubt, reopen old wounds in Bangladesh. In Islamabad, the dapper and unflappable General Sahibzada Yakub Khan who resigned as force commander in East Pakistan on 5 March, 1971, broke his silence on the events of the war after 27 years. Gen Yaqub Khan was appointed military Governor of East Pakistan on 1 March and resigned four days later as he could not 'kill his Pakistani brothers'. He was replaced three days later by Gen Tikka Khan.

Yakub Khan's version of various events including 'Operation Blitz', which he masterminded as a contingency plan to deal with the breakdown of law and order, was the first public reaction to the Niazi book.

journalist and former bureaucrat, Altaf Gauhar has also joined issue with Niazi on the portrayal of events in his book.

He turns the onus of cruelty of troops on Bengalis from Tikka Khan to Niazi himself, citing the case of Colonel Gadean and his "shooting spree on Nawabpur Road, Dhaka, where he bagged more than 34 Bengali birds".

Niazi's book is bound to spark off controversy. It does little credit to GHQ Rawalpindi and the Pakistani Army. It will certainly be of greatest interest to the military community in India which was given General Jacob's account of the 'Surrender at Dhaka and the birth of a nation'. *It will show the Indian victory in the East was not a foregone conclusion.*

Niazi's book had set the cat among the pigeons in Pakistan. In India, "The Betrayal of East Pakistan", must be regarded as history from the horses mouth.

SURRENDER AND POW CAMP NO. 100

General Manekshaw had informed us that an Indian team would be coming to Dhaka to finalise surrender arrangements. The helicopter hovered over Dhaka Airport, the heavy blades churning in the air like the arms of a giant windmill, and soon settled down. Major-General Jacob, chief of staff (COS), Indian Eastern Command, alighted with his team from the helicopter. Brigadier Baqir Siddiqui, the Pakistani COS, after receiving them at the airport, escorted them to HQ Eastern Command. The Indian team had come to discuss and negotiate the terms and conditions for the cessation of hostilities. They had brought a draft of the surrender document. The preliminary discussions between Jacob and Baqir, the two chiefs of staff, were carried out in Baqir's office. After the presentation of the proposal, Baqir discussed the issue with me. I asked Baqir to call Ganerals Jamshed and Farman and Admiral Sharif, the senior Pakistani army and naval officers present at headquarters. The Indian delegation blackmailed us with the threat that, if their conditions were not agreed to, they would hand over the local loyal population, and our civilian officers who had taken refuge in the Intercontinental Hotel, to the Mukti Bahini forces, who would massacre them. Despite our objections to the use of the phrase 'Joint Command of India and Bangladesh', and to the place and

"We objected to the idea of a surrender ceremony. I refused to have such a thing but our discussions were to no avail. The Indians were adamant. They blackmailed us by threatening to kill the loyal Bengalis"

manner of surrender, in the circumstances we were forced to comply.

Personally, I felt indignant and agitated, for the Indian proposal was inadequate, failing to highlight the measures for the safe custody of the civilians. As the Governor had resigned on 14 December and the civilian officials had moved to the free zone of Hotel Intercontinental, the onus now rested on me, as both Military Commander and Civil Administrator, to ensure that no harm befell the civilians. I therefore spared no effort to ensure their protection and safe return to Pakistan. I put forward two conditions to Jacob: first, that the Pakistan troops would retain their personal arms for self-protection and the protection of the civilians until adequate Indian troops were available for their protection in Dhaka Area; and second, that all Pakistani civilians, civilian officials, and staff should be treated like civil internees, not left at the mercy of the Bengalis, and accompany the troops wherever they went.

Jacob readily agreed to the first demand, but argued that the civilians would have to stay in Bangladesh until swapped with the Bengalis stranded in camps in the west. Further talks would be useless if they failed to embrace the civilian issue in its totality, by granting sanctuary in unequivocal terms on behalf of both the Indian Army and the political leadership. My adamant posture left Jacob with no option

"The Indian delegation blackmailed us with the threat that if their conditions were not agreed to, they would hand over the local loyal population and our civilian officers to the Mukti Bahini forces"

but to advise his superiors of the pre-conditions. After hectic telephoning, Jacob was given *carte blanche* powers to deal with the issue. With the impediment removed, the matter was resolved.

The Bengali member of the negotiating team objected but his protests were set aside. During this period, many senior Indian and Bengali officers and reporters had come to Dhaka. They risked being held as POWs if negotiations broke down, since according to the code of conduct and professional ethics, protection could only be given to the negotiating teams not to unauthorised entrants, while hostilities were continuing.

We also objected to the idea of a surrender ceremony. I refused to have such a thing but our discussions were to no avail. The Indians were adamant. They blackmailed us by threatening to kill the loyal Bengalis. In fact, many young men were butchered and we were told that all the civilians would be handed over to the Mukti Bahini. The question of the surrender ceremony should have been decided in consultation with the civilian authorities of the East Pakistan Government, but they had resigned and gone to the neutral zone. Thus, since I had been abandoned by the Central Government and deserted by the Provincial Government intentionally, I had to take the decision. Major-General Jacob and Brigadier Baqir Siddiqui then started working

Pakistani tanks immobilised by Indian Army

Pakistani aircraft brought down by Indian Air Force on disp

out the details for the concentration of civilians in predesignated areas and other administrative problems affecting the cease-fire, the concentration of troops in other sectors, and their move direct to Wagah.

The most difficult task was to collect the troops, civil officers, civilians and their families staying in and around Dhaka. There were Civil Aviation, PIA, Customs, and other Federal Government employees who had to be moved to the cantonment area. There was confusion in the city. The Mukti Bahini forces were very active and were attack-

Innocent people killed during the war

ing the civilians. My chief of staff, by his indomitable spirit and courage, and by working day and night, organised the evacuation of these people and assembled them in the cantonment area. This was all done within three days before our departure from Dhaka.

The plight of the Biharis and other loyal elements was heart-rending. Their cries at being left to the vultures for ethnic cleansing were most depressing and embarrassing. Reports of a massacre had started pouring in. Young loyal East Pakistanis were made to stand for target practice and were bayoneted by the Mukti Bahini. Maulvi Farid Ahmed, a respected leader, an ex-MNA and a loyal Pakistani, was killed and his body, along with many others was dragged through the streets of Dhaka. We told the Indians that it was a violation of the agreement, but they were using such incidents to force our hand.

The squadron of F-86 Sabre aircraft had been grounded since 6 December, as the intensive bombing by Indian aircraft had damaged the runway, making it non-operational. The aircraft themselves had been rendered unusable by Air Cmdre. Inam. The pilots, who under the prevailing conditions had ceased to be operational, were despatched to West Pakistan to save their lives. Only Air Commodore Inam-ul-Haq, the commander of the mini air force, stayed behind in captivity. The army aviation helicopters, loaded with children, women, and wounded, flew to Pakistan via Burma.

The surrender ceremony took place on 16 December 1971. Major-General Farman and Admiral Sharif witnessed the ceremony. As I signed the document with trembling hands, sorrow rose from my heart to my eyes, brimming them with unshed tears of despair and frustration. Before the ceremony, a French reporter came to me and said, "How are you feeling, Tiger?" I replied, "Depressed." Arora, who was standing nearby, remarked, "He had an impossible task under extremely difficult conditions. Any other general in these circumstances could not have done better."

"Ordered to lay down arms by the President to save West Pakistan, my mind swung between the two options — risk West Pakistan being further overrun, or jeopardize my reputation, my career, my future..."

The destiny I could not evade was not of my choosing or making. Ordered to lay down arms by the President to save West Pakistan, my mind swung between the two options — risk West Pakistan being further overrun, or jeopardize my reputation, my career, my future and the high tradition of the Pakistan Army by submitting to the orders. I had accepted a task beset with hazards and difficulties, when East Pakistan was in disarray and disorder. Two senior generals had refused to accept the responsibility on various pretexts, one had resigned when raging torrents of insurgency became obvious, and another had bungled the situation. I was twelfth in seniority when I was selected for the third senior post in the army. Deciding to agree to the second option, I had swallowed my pride and made the supreme sacrifice of forfeiting reputation and honour, and the honour of my gallant troops, in the national interest. •

The Betrayal Of East Pakistan by Lt-Gen A A K Niazi. Published by Manohar Publishers, New Delhi. Price Rs 450

Reviving the game

Calcutta plans to have a hockey stadium

The hockey ritual continues with all its empty trappings in Calcutta. In the home of Indian hockey, the game has been sliding down for over two decades. Today, the five-division league and the Beighton Cup are all completed in a month and a half.

In the old days, hockey was a high point in the sporting calendar and the locals gave outstation luminaries like Inam-ur-Rahman and Dhyan Chand's sons Ashok and Raj Kumar a run for their money.

But those were heady days and crowd support was almost as good as it was for football. Hockey was played for a little more than three months, though that was before cricket fever gripped Calcutta and a host of cricket matches encroached into the hockey "season".

Too many matches in too many disciplines were being played on too few grounds. Success in international cricket brought more money into that game, while football constantly found its own benefactors. Only hockey suffered, as the game was hardly accepted as a worthwhile sport.

The situation was sought to be corrected by former India captain Gurbux Singh and police chief Dinesh Bajpai, secretary and president, respectively, of the Bengal Hockey Association. With the blessings of four-time Olympian Leslie Claudius and the outstanding Keshav Dutt, they set about restructuring the hockey set-up in the state.

Starting out with organising training camps for youngsters on the artificial surface at the Sports Authority of India complex, they soon realised that the distance and poor transport facilities were dampening enthusiasm for the scheme.

It was then that they revived the long-dormant idea of a ground exclusively for hockey in the Maidan. The BHA officials have had a series of meetings with the state government and have secured the consent of one of the oldest clubs in India — Rangers — to take over its ground. The problem is to rehabilitate the other four clubs who share that ground. But this is being worked out.

"We are not worried about the financial implications of this project," says Gurbux Singh. "The projected budget is Rs 2.5 crore and we are confident we will raise the amount. In fact, we are talking to several sponsors and the initial response is good. We could earmark specific blocks for individual sponsors. This will allow us to raise enough to meet expenses, especially since the government is also prepared to chip in.

"But can you imagine the impact of this?" asks Gurbux. "With one stroke, we can stretch the hockey season from one-and-a-half months to eight or nine months if we want. We can have matches through to monsoons and several times each day. We are planning an elaborate training scheme for youngsters as well as top-level international tournaments.

"We know there is great enthusiasm for hockey in Bengal. And I can guarantee at least five or six Bengalis in the Indian squad inside of five years. That is because the basics of hockey and the game in which Bengalis excel, football, are the same. The additional point is that hockey is not a body-contact game, which will work in favour of the Bengalis' inherent skill. Yes, we can work wonders here."

A hockey stadium in the heart of Calcutta will certainly help revive the game here. And, with two locals Baljit Saini and Rajeev Mishra making it to the Indian team despite the obvious impediments like lack of practice facilities, youngsters will naturally take to the game in numbers.

But there is still one hurdle. The Maidan is under army control, so its permission is necessary to construct a stadium. One hopes, in the interest of what is still India's national game, the army will allow construction. Hockey in Calcutta deserves a break. •

Arijit Sen/Calcutta

"We'll have an elaborate training scheme for youngsters and top-level international tournaments. There is great enthusiasm for hockey in Bengal. We can work wonders here," says Gurbux Singh

NORTH-EAST

North by north-east

The defence minister's visit indicates the BJP government's seriousness about tackling the problems of the region

The first week of April was a very significant one for Assam and, indeed, for the whole of the north-east. Union defence minister George Fernandes toured six of the seven north-eastern states (all except Tripura) to get a "first-hand" feel of the ground realities in this volatile region.

The defence minister began his five-day "study tour" on 2 April from Guwahati. "The north-east is a highly sensitive area because it is bound on all sides by foreign countries, some of which were involved in disputes with India about the international border. The insurgency problem, lack of development and large-scale corruption have together added a new dimension to the sensitivity of the region," observed George Fernandes, while pledging to work sincerely to solve these problems of the region.

While stating that the solution to the insurgency problem must be "political", and not "military", the defence minister reiterated that no decision regarding withdrawal of the army could be taken without the consent of all concerned parties. He also emphasised the fact that the army had been deployed in Assam at the request of the state government.

The defence minister's sojourn assumed special significance in the light of his announcement that he was prepared to "go to any length" to bring the insurgent outfits of the north-east to the negotiating table. And in Arunachal Pradesh, he even said that 'contact' with militant groups had been established recently.

Meanwhile, the Union minister of state for communications, Kabindra Purkayastha, on a visit to his home state, has criticised the manner in which the army has been used to contain insurgency, while little or no effort has been made to solve the problem through dialogue with the insurgent outfits.

Purkayastha assured the people and politicians of Assam that the BJP-led government will review the situation and ensure that the army is used less and less for maintenance of civilian law and order. "The insurgency problem must be tackled more by dialogue and discussions, than through the force of arms," asserted Purkayastha.

At around the same time, chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta concluded a four-day visit to New Delhi and announced that the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) was still with the United Front (UF). But Mahanta was quick to add that his party would have to review its position if the UF went out of its way to support the Congress as "the Congress is the main enemy of the AGP".

The CM also clarified the AGP's position *vis-a-vis* the 'federal front'. "Our relations with the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the National Conference (NC) will be maintained, since the AGP is a regional party."

The chief minister warned that nobody should expect the AGP, without a single member in the Lok Sabha, to dictate terms to the new government. He also dismissed talk that he had gone to New Delhi to try and strike a deal with the BJP. But he said that the country's electorate had voted the BJP to power and the other parties had to accept the fact.

Mahanta went on to state that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had assured him that he would consider all the points raised in a memorandum submitted to him on behalf of the Assam government. The AGP government has urged the Prime Minister to put a moratorium on all loan repayments till the condition of the state's finances improved. The burden of central loans on the state as on 1 April, 1997 was Rs 3,998 crore, while the Centre had deducted Rs 772 crore and Rs 610 crore at source as repayment instalment during 1996-97 and 1997-98 respectively.

LET'S TALK: *Union defence minister George Fernandes*

SHADOW OF THE GUN: *CM P.K. Mahanta surrounded by securitymen*

A conference of chief ministers of the north-eastern states is presently being convened to chalk out a joint strategy to tackle insurgency in the region. And then, Atal Behari Vajpayee will be making his maiden visit to Assam. The Prime Minister's packed schedule includes the inauguration of the Naranayan Setu, the third rail-cum-road bridge over the Brahmaputra at Jogighopa in lower Assam.

And the people of the region are hoping that the visits, in quick succession, of the defence minister and the Prime Minister will set the tone for a purposeful north-eastern policy of the new government at the Centre. •

Dilip Chandan/Guwahati

BIHAR

The accused

Former minister Brij Bihari Prasad is arrested in connection with the BECEE scam

Brij Bihari Prasad has become synonymous with controversy in Bihar. First, the science and technology minister in the Rabri Devi Cabinet was forced to resign after an FIR was lodged against him in connection with the brutal murder of Samajwadi Party leader Devendra Dubey on 23 February, just after he had contested the Motihari Lok Sabha seat and lost it to Prasad's wife, Rama Devi. Prasad had been named as a prime accused in the murder case but a pending warrant of arrest against him was later withdrawn.

Then, early in the morning of 4 April, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) struck. At around 6 am, the CBI raided Brij Bihari Prasad's house and arrested him in connection with the 'BECEE scam', pertaining to the gross irregularities in the results of the Bihar Engineering Competitive Entrance Examination, 1996, which had prompted the Patna High Court to order a CBI probe.

Brij Bihari Prasad was arrested under Sections 120(B) 409, 420, 468 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and 13(2)(1) and (D) of the Prevention of Corruption Act in case no. RC 43 S/97.

Mind to marketplace

A convention in Calcutta emphasises the need to convert research into development

"The challenge facing research and development (R&D) and industry in India today is to ensure the effective use of information technology, to involve every Indian in the scientific movement," declared West Bengal chief minister Jyoti Basu, while inaugurating R&D India '98.

'Converting research into development' was the motto of the four-day convention held at Calcutta's Science City, from 8-11 April. Co-sponsored by Variable Energy Cyclotron Centre, Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, and Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and organised by New Wave Display Services Pvt. Ltd, the fair brought together pioneers of industry, luminaries of science, leaders in research, enthusiastic foreign participants, and the common man.

The emphasis, for a change, was on the practical application of scientific research; its real value in a nation's development, a people's progress. "For the common man today, the importance of science and technology lies in the quality of goods and services that he receives from across the counter," observed V.S. Ramamurthy, secretary, department of science and technology, GOI. "It is of little use to the people if we excel in water technology but our taps remain without water; if we make nuclear missiles,

SCIENTIFIC SPIRIT: *R&D India '98*

In simultaneous raids conducted at his Patna and Muzaffarpur residences, the CBI probe team seized incriminating documents and Rs two lakh in cash. Raids were also conducted at the residences of some of his close aides. From a cupboard in Prasad's house, some papers related to the BECEE were found. Besides other incriminating documents, a letter written by a Janata Dal legislator was also recovered. In it, the Dal MLA, Shashi Kumar Rai, had requested the then minister, Prasad, to help a candidate who had failed in the BECEE.

The former minister was produced in the special CBI court of Justice S.K. Lal, who remanded him to judicial custody. An ailing Prasad was first taken to Beur Central Jail, but later shifted to the Patna Medical College Hospital and then to the special ward of the IGIMS.

At the court, a visibly sick Brij Bihari Prasad was helped along by his newly-elected parliamentarian wife, Rama Devi. While Prasad remained quiet, an angry Rama Devi, Motihari MP, spewed venom: *"Isse accha tha ki CBI-wale inko goli maar dete* (It would have been better if the CBI had shot him instead)... The CBI wants to kill him. That is why they have arrested him, in this precarious condition."

It was on 2 April that the CBI had held extensive meetings reviewing the status of its probe in connection with the various scams detected in Bihar. The aim was to speed up investigations into the animal husbandry scam, the *dhoti*-saree scam, and the BECEE scam.

According to the CBI case, the BECEE examinees, in 1996, had shelled out large sums of money to make the grade. The majority of the students who had 'qualified' were either

SANJAY KUMAR

MR CONTROVERSY: *Brij Bihari Prasad*

the sons/daughters of engineers or contractors or were related to some politician or the other.

On 17 July, 1997, the Patna High Court had ordered a CBI probe into the affair after examining the writ petitions of two 'failed' examinees, Arun Kumar from Jehanabad and Pramod Dokania from Bhagalpur. The High Court had constituted a special committee on 30 August, 1996 to investigate the matter. This inquiry proved that a 'common procedure' had been followed in the BECEE, held on 30 June, 1996. Blank answersheets were submitted by some examinees. These blank

but can't make our own cars. So, the step from the laboratory to the marketplace is vital, and it is not a trivial one," he pointed out.

"We must try and understand why Indian scientists do their best work outside India," said Ashok S. Ganguly, chairman ICI India Ltd. "To bring about a real change, there must be an effective alliance between academia, R&D and industry."

Noted scientist M.G.K. Menon was scathing: "We have allowed our scientific infrastructure to decay. And it is an unfortunate fact that R&D is not given pride of place in India."

Why is this? It is partly because of a prevalent perception that research in India has hardly contributed to the development of the country. And it was this mind-set that the convention sought to overcome: by highlighting the role of 'R-in-D' through the years, and outlining future plans.

"R&D is a necessity, not a lazy pastime. Without R&D, there is no hope for industrial survival," asserted Bikash Sinha, director, Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics and Variable Energy Cyclotron Centre, Calcutta.

Claude Detraz, director, Institut National De Physique Nucleaire Et Des Physique Des Particules, France, emphasised how "basic research contributes to the welfare of humanity" and how there was a direct "relationship between research and economic development". "The interaction between academia and business is not a one-way street, and it is heartening to know that India is devoting time and effort to think about this."

Despite all the talk and the optimism, there was no escaping the fact that, given the magnitude of the problems facing the country, precious little has been achieved through countless seminars and conferences. For all the publicised and promised technological advancement, a vast majority of Indians in a large part of India, are concerned more about sustenance than science, *roti* than research, drinking water than atomic development. That's just the way it is. And that's just the way it shouldn't be.

"So, just 600-odd days before we enter the new millennium, we must embark on a mission to harness our intellectual infrastructure to create wealth and social good," stressed R.A. Mashelkar, director general, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, GOI. "Only R&D can bridge the gap between what we have at present and what we can achieve. For that, we must launch a 'grey' revolution that will build a new India where [illegible] and not [illegible] tion, will dominate. And it is only appropriate that this and women should begin from Calcutta."

For four days, many minds at Calcutta did lead to R&D: India '98. An exhibition [illegible] and technological [illegible] and the pursuits of [illegible]

sheets were later filled in by answers which tallied with those on the 'master sheet/copy'.

Altogether, 1,100 candidates had cleared the examination, but the Patna High Court cancelled the registration of 245 examinees. The charge was that they had managed to pass the BECEE through 'malpractice', i.e., by paying up anything between Rs 3-5 lakh.

The CBI was, initially, given two months time to complete its investigations and submit a report. Later, the time was extended. The CBI, after investigating the entire procedure, lodged cases against some 250 persons.

The BECEE scam (also known as the 'Talent scam') has dragged down several big names: then science and technology minister Brij Bihari Prasad; his personal secretary Sunil Kumar Bhagat; the principal of the Muzaffarpur Institute of Technology (MIT), R.C. Das Vikal, who was arrested on 4 March. MIT was responsibile for conducting BECEE'96.

The chairman of the Bihar Public Service Commission (BPSC), Laxmi Rai, was interrogated in January. The director, science and technology department, Bharat Bhushan's house and office were also raided.

Interestingly, neither Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief Laloo Prasad Yadav nor chief minister Rabri Devi have uttered a word in Brij Bihari Prasad's defence ever since the CBI zeroed in on him. •

Naved Zahir/Patna

WEST BENGAL

Freedom for the press

The GNLF's decision to ban a newspaper sparks trouble in the hills

Normally, a newspaper takes up issues and creates public opinion. But sometimes, a newspaper itself becomes the issue and the cause of a political dispute.

In Darjeeling, the spotlight is trained on *Sunchari Samachar* these days. This popular Nepali news daily, published from Siliguri, has recently been banned by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) in the three hill subdivisions of Darjeeling district. This move to muzzle the media has galvanised the anti-GNLF forces (except the CPI(M), of course).

On 23 March, the Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong branch-committees of the GNLF clamped a ban on the circulation of *Sunchari Samachar* because the said newspaper had been publishing "lies in the name of news items and derogatory editorials and thus maligning the newspaper world". The GNLF leaders went on to urge the hill people not to read *Sunchari* any more, as the newspaper had been publishing "deliberately false news items and derogatory articles only to defame the GNLF and detract the people in general".

The reaction to this clamp-down was sharp and spontaneous. It was widely seen as an "undemocratic" move by the GNLF to try and reassert itself in the hills. Subash Ghisingh's unit has been badly hit by the emergence of the Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxist (CPRM) in this region.

Gauging the popular mood, the CPRM, the Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League (ABGL), the Congress, the Trinamul Congress (TMC), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other smaller political parties in the hills, were quick to take up the cause of the newspaper under siege.

Labelling it "an attack on the freedom of the press", all non-GNLF party leaders, except the CPI(M), got together at an emergency meeting. They resolved to hit the streets and sell copies of the *Sunchari Samachar*. The leaders kept their promise and the readers responded in style. Despite the blanket ban and the threat to the hawkers, the newspaper was somehow being distributed. So, the banned newspaper proved to be a sellout.

This was a bad blow for the GNLF, which has often resorted to banning newspapers in the hills of Darjeeling to stifle criticism. In the late Eighties, *Himacholi*, the first Nepali news daily of India, published from Siliguri, was hounded by the GNLF till it finally wound up. In the second half of the Nineties, *Aab*, a Nepali newspaper, was silenced. *Aja Bholi*, another Nepali newspaper, has also faced persecution.

DEVI PRASAD SINHA

MUZZLING THE MEDIA: *Subash Ghisingh*

Now, *Sunchari Samachar* is in the line of fire. Editor Kumar Pradhan told SUNDAY that the GNLF had taken strong exception to two articles concerning the points raised by Subash Ghisingh with relation to the International Court of Justice at Hague. "The issue of 'Hague' as raised by Ghisingh remained vague to the common man and so the post-editorial article by K.M. Rai on 19 February, clearly mentioned the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice and its activities. Again, a post-editorial article by H.B. Chhetri, published on 21 February, was analytically critical of Ghisingh's so-called Hague issue. It was true that both the articles had exposed Ghisingh and his Hague-issue," explained Pradhan, who defended the articles. "The articles are not derogatory in nature. Had it been so, the GNLF leaders had the option of going to court and filing a defamation suit. But they have ventured into

THE CHALLENGERS: *Dawa Lama (left) and R.B. Rai*

a wrong track trying to gag our voice and it will never be that easy," warned the editor.

Kumar Pradhan has sent memorandums to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, home minister L.K. Advani, I&B minister Sushma Swaraj, West Bengal CM Jyoti Basu, information and culture minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, and chairman of the Press Council of India P.B. Sawant, explaining the whole matter.

"Now, there is the application of violent methods to hinder the circulation of the daily. Vehicles carrying our newspapers are being looted and reporters, paper agents, vendors and readers are being threatened with dire consequences if they do not stop sending reports, selling and reading *Sunchari Samachar*. The ban is totally illegal and unconstitutional as no party has any right to ban any newspaper," wrote Pradhan.

CPRM leader and Rajya Sabha member Dawa Lama has also written to the PM: "Since local daily newspapers exposed the nexus and the role of the GNLF, the GNLF has given a boycott call on the *Sunchari*!...The GNLF has started flexing muscles by threatening the poor hawkers of dire consequences and thus trying to stop the circulation of the paper."

In a memorandum to Sushma Swaraj, representatives of different political parties, including the CPRM, ABGL, BJP, Congress, TMC, expressed "deep concern over the latest quasi-authoritarian edict of the GNLF leader Subash Ghisingh banning a popular Nepali daily newspaper...and his all-out efforts to implement it with the help of his cohorts and cronies backed by muscle-power. The only fault of the *Sunchari* was when it took the posture of exposing his (Ghisingh) misdeeds and activities which apparently tantamount to anti-national." The memorandum went on to lambast Ghisingh for his act of "boycotting the last parliamentary election in three hill sub-divisions and in order to make it effective he called *bandh* on 20, 21 and 22 February, 1998, with the sole intention of discouraging the voters from turning out on the polling day besides issuing a threatening note of dire consequences to those who dare to flout his alleged writ on pain of losing life and property.

"All this...runs counter to the words and spirit of the Constitution of India and can be unequivocally termed as 'anti-national', suppressing and outraging the fundamental basic rights of the citizens of India." •

Iva Guha/Darjeeling

SUNDAY WEEK

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 19 APRIL, 1998

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

Weed out what you think is unnecessary. Start positively so that you have time to develop later on. A change may be disturbing at first, but you will find that things begin to fall into place. Studies seem to be fulfilling.

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

It looks as though the recent run of successes and good luck has resulted in your taking too much for granted. It is just when you are feeling on the crest of a wave that a fall into the depths is most likely. Just slow down a little and take stock of your situation.

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

The spoken word can be very effective at some point when you have to make your intentions crystal clear. It may be too much for someone who has been on the wrong track. A contract may be signed and an engagement booked. You will have the opportunity to get something off your chest.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

A separation can solve a problem. Chaos can surround you or your partner and will need to be handled with some care. A change of premises or a home move, made in a hurry, can land you and your loved ones in a dreadful mess for a while.

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

It may be a toss-up between the social rounds and the time spent on your own. There does not seem to be much room for any choice and you should just take it as it comes. Someone in an official capacity may want to have a word with you on a friendly basis.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

Restrict your activities to one thing at a time. Your spouse's family may be in an argumentative or interfering mood. A chat with neighbours will keep you abreast of developments in your area. Friends can be both supportive and entertaining.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

You may have the best intentions if you are considering to spring surprises at home, but other people may not take them in the spirit they are intended. Disappointments are likely where creative endeavours are concerned. Others may have mapped areas you thought were pioneering.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

Your attempts to get inside info. can be balked by red tape. Someone whose help you need urgently may be away from home or out of the country. Don't be frustrated. If you have lines to learn, just shut yourself away and concentrate.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

Be open to a change of technique or practice. Alterations to your home may be arranged. Do not start something off before funds have been made available. Resources should not be abused. A bargain may not be what it seems, so go steady. Ask a friend for advice.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

You seem to be out on a limb. Learn to stand on your own feet. Get your priorities right. You may have a lot of choices and discrimination can be difficult. When people interfere, they are a downright nuisance. But encouragement from an elder should be appreciated.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

There are some miscreants at work, trying to sabotage your plans and ideas. Confront the problem. Try to find a compromise that would accommodate both your needs and desires and those of your loved ones. Influential people will be more relaxed in informal surroundings, such as your own home.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

Enthusiastic support and, perhaps, financial backing can be gained readily. The pleasure-loving side of your nature is now likely to receive all the enjoyment it desires. Time spent with loved ones will be happy and reassuring. •

Explosive idea

BJP leader from UP, Lalji Tandon, has a simple solution for all Atal Behari Vajpayee's problems with allies, his party, Parliament, etc. He believes the BJP should detonate the atom bomb and leave the rest to God.

"*Maine to unse kaha,*" he was heard telling a colleague after the swearing-in. "*Aap atom bum phod dijiye. Phir China, America, Russia, cheekhtey chillate raha jayenge. Aur Jayalalitha and Swamy ki baat kol nahin*

A.B. Vajpayee: will he bury it?

sunega (I told him — you just explode the bomb — then China, America and Russia will go into a tailspin and no one will pay any attention to the likes of Jayalalitha and Swamy)."

His colleagues remonstrated. Tandon was unperturbed. "*Arrey bomb nahin to patakha hi chala dijiye. Kisi pata chalega* (If not a bomb, just set off a high intensity cracker. Who will know the difference)?"

Vajpayee is considering the advice.

HEARD AT THE AICC

Q: What is the RH factor in this government?

A: Reliance and Hinduja — and it is positive.

A CONGRESS WORKER, AFTER A.B. VAJPAYEE INAUGURATED A TEMPLE FUNDED BY THE HINDUJA GROUP

Out of danger

The Rabri Devi-led Bihar government had better watch out. One law and order problem and the Vajpayee government will unhesitatingly use Article 356 to dismiss it. The problem arises from two factors — one, that the Samata Party is absolutely confident that it can form the government and is chafing at the bit to be given a chance and that because the power cake is small, the MPs are all fighting among themselves. So Vajpayee will have to take drastic steps to keep the flock together.

Does this mean that he'll do the same with the Tamil Nadu government?

Not a chance. Few know that Vajpayee and chief minister M. Karunanidhi are good personal friends. During the Emergency, Tamil Nadu, Kashmir and Gujarat (where Babubhai Patel was the chief minister), were the three states where those opposed to the Emergency could walk free. Karunanidhi did a lot to help the Janata Party. It was the friendship of those days of agitation and struggle, which has endured.

During the Jain Commission hearings, when Vajpayee was required to depose before the commission to help make out a case that the DMK had links with those who assassinated Rajiv Gandhi, in his deposition, he said that such a thing was unthinkable. The DMK may have political relations with the LTTE, but it was ridiculous to believe that Karunanidhi plotted with them to kill a former [illegible] India.

During Mrs Gandhi's time, when Karunanidhi was chief minister and Tamil Nadu was undergoing a severe drought sometime in the early Sixties, the CM came to Delhi to ask for money from central government. It was Vajpayee who pleaded on Karunanidhi's behalf. He told Mrs Gandhi in Parliament: "*Inke paas Karuna hai, lekin Nidhi nahin hai. Inko kuchh paise de dijiye.*" (He's got compassion (*karuna*) but no *nidhi* (money)).

So whatever Jayalalitha might say, the Tamil Nadu government is not going.

CHECK-LIST

The height of sycophancy: in praise of Sonia Gandhi at the AICC meet

- **Alka Lamba:** Likened Sonia Gandhi to the fragrance of the brightest blooms in the garden which Rajiv Gandhi left behind.
- **Siddaramaiah:** It was the one who suggested that Sonia Gandhi should take over the party — she's the ablest among us to lead it.
- **Ambika Soni:** Compared Sonia Gandhi's leadership qualities to Indira Gandhi, and claimed he had been one of the first ones to spot it.
- **Shankarsinh Vaghela:** It is because of your campaigning that we won 141 seats — otherwise, what the situation would have been, it is never not sky.

The Rajput factor

The Rajputs from UP are furious. They reckon that they were the ones who led the BJP to victory. And they have been ignored in the Cabinet. There isn't a single Rajput from UP in the government.

The BJP has improved its position marginally in UP (from 52 to 58), but it is because of the support of the Rajputs that they've managed to create a base for themselves. It is also clear that because there was no umbrella of Opposition forces in UP — i.e. an understanding between Mayawati and Mulayam — the BJP could increase its seats, but not the percentage of votes. However, the Rajputs believe that they've done the most for the BJP in UP.

There are two contenders for ministerships in the next round of government expansion. One is Sanjay Singh who won Amethi for the BJP and has already been a cabinet minister, and the other, Rajnath Singh, who is a strategist but not as senior in political terms as Sanjay Singh. Now it remains to be seen which of the two is elevated.

The bandmaster

He figured it could be a long time before he got the chance to make the inaugural speech at an AICC session again. So Sitaram Kesri decided to make the most of the opportunity at the last session.

On the face of it, he took the mike to resign as party president and propose Sonia Gan-

Kesri's happy days are over

dhi's name for the post. But as expected, he took somewhat of a detour and began reminiscing about Mahatma Gandhi (the wrong Gandhi-ji!) and would have gone on and on, if Oscar Fernandes had not thought fit to slip in a note telling him to get on with it.

After which Kesri did the second thing that was expected of him. He got emotional. Thumping the desk in front of him he reiterated that it was not *bhavana* (emotions) but *karyakarta* (dooty as he called it later) that had brought him here. At this, both Narasimha Rao and Sharad Pawar had a hard time trying to keep the smirk off their faces.

Unfortunately, Kesri took to thumping the table at regular intervals that it soon formed a staccato beat. Hearing this, an AICC member commented, "It looks like Kesri is remembering his bandmaster days." (He began his career in politics as the trombone player of the Seva Dal, affectionately referred to, by his colleagues, as bandmaster days.)

HEARD AT THE 11 ASHOK ROAD HEADQUARTERS OF THE BJP

They can't build the temple. So they decided to keep the Ram issue alive this way.

A BJP WORKER ON WHY RAM JETHMALANI, WHO DOESN'T BELONG TO ANY PARTY, IS A RAJYA SABHA MEMBER, AND IS OF NO CONSEQUENCE TO THE JP, WAS APPOINTED THE URBAN DEVELOPMENT MINISTER

[illegible] to be [illegible] to [illegible] Congress. In his speech, PRD referred to words in letters Sonia Gandhi knew that it was not to the CPI(M) or the BJP that he had lost the last Lok Sabha elections to.

Luckily for Pranab, the session broke for lunch just before PRD took the mike, as the older Congressman had ample warning to make himself scarce from the dais. Which was just as well, because the next thing on PRD's agenda was to ask Sonia to give a clarion call to all those who had left the party to return. Such as Mamata Banerjee. Needless to say, the lady is not [illegible] Mukherjee's.

But for Pranab Mukherjee, the good news is that Sonia just smiled and let the opportunity to give a clarion call go by.

CHECK-LIST

On the hit list: fresh appointments the BJP is contemplating

■ **High Commissioner to [illegible]:** Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has already indicated that he expects all political appointees to resign. L.M. Singhvi, Salman Haider's predecessor, is giving out that he may be sent to London as 'the PM's special envoy'. Not a good augury for Haider.

■ **Lieutenant-Governor of [illegible]:** Jagmohan Khanna, the current incumbent, is on good terms with Sahib Singh Verma. Vijay Kumar Malhotra, [illegible] defence production and [illegible] to be the principal secretary to Vajpayee [illegible] is the likely replacement.

■ **Governor of [illegible]:** [illegible] after Romesh Bhandari's [illegible] Singh has indicated that he doesn't want a political man as governor. So the chances of Sundarlal Patwa, who was keen on the job, have receded.

■ **Head of the National [illegible] (NSG):** A task force has [illegible] and to carve out a role for it [illegible] has begun on, when it [illegible] headed by a retired [illegible] what step is next.

Sonia just smiled and let the opportunity to give a clarion call go by.

Open-and-shut case

Budh Singh [illegible] looking to be sacked from government for [illegible] charge-sheeted in [illegible] bribery case. The BJP has an excellent explanation: it says that before he joined the BJP, he was a bachelor, free to follow his heart. Now that he's married into respectability itself, the BJP will not take into account his past indiscretions.

Budh Singh: helps to be a loner

The fact is that the BJP can't afford to sack [illegible] with as narrow a majority as they've got. They can't afford to alienate [illegible] MP. The [illegible] contemplated [illegible] Singh, and he's [illegible] Bedavati [illegible] Alok Dixit [illegible]

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SWRAJ PAUL: TALKING ABOUT THE GANDHIS

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Jayalalitha is sore over the Centre's refusal to dismiss the DMK government in Tamil Nadu

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The Lord Paul

Tony Blair considers him to be the hardest working peer in the House of Lords

Emerging from the shadows

Your cover story *Boss lady* (12 — 18 April) is extremely readable. Sonia Gandhi's candid admission that "we brought about our own downfall" and her statement that the Congress must shun what is merely expedient and stand by what is right showed that she had done her homework before taking up the top job of the party. Her decision to form a task force to streamline and prune the party from the district committee to the highest level indicated her keenness to revitalise the Congress.

She also hinted at revamping the Youth Congress and the Mahila Congress that had become the 'close preserves of self-perpetuating groups' and were used as 'stepping stones for a political career'. Grass-roots workers, the youth, women, minorities and the backwards, Sonia said, would now have more importance. People would be empowered through Panchayati Raj and the workers through party democracy. Her sincere efforts would invigorate her partymen, who are now down in the dumps.

P.N. Chaturvedi, New Delhi

■Sonia Gandhi's speech at the Siri Fort auditorium in New Delhi reminds one of a similar speech made by Rajiv Gandhi at the 1985 AICC plenary session in Bombay. But nothing happened after that, and he began rejuvenating the Congress only after it lost its credibility and the 1989 elections.

Although Sonia has shown genuine concern for the revival of the Congress and has already spelt out several measures to revitalise the party, it would be difficult for her to achieve the goal simply because she lacks political experience.

Rupen Das, Calcutta (West Bengal)

■Even after a month of being in power as party chief, Sonia Gandhi remains the enigma she has always been. Though she has chalked out her plan of action, she will not let any other party worker think for her — she will be her own boss. Her tone has become sharper, her speeches more hard-hitting and she is making a tremendous effort to reach out to the people.

Unlike her predecessors, a very wise move on Sonia's part has been to treat all Congress workers as equal and not let any one lobby get close to her. Almost all former party chiefs have had their share of favourites among the partymen whose petty politics not only led to their own downfall but the party also suffered heavily. Sonia's emphasis on accountability has already ensured an imperceptible shift from personal agendas to a national agenda. The real Sonia seems to be finally emerging from the shadows.

Samar Guha Roy, Bombay (Maharashtra)

P. Chidambaram: simplicity is the key

So long, farewell

I enjoyed reading *No moody blues* (29 March — 4 April) which served as an appetiser to the rest of the stories. There could be no better account of Chidambaram's last day as India's finance minister — simple yet touching.

Wetshokhrolo Lasuh, Kohima (Nagaland)

Sonia Gandhi: her own boss

Designer disaster

With nearly 65 per cent of the Indian population living below the poverty line, how many of us can afford high-fashion outfits costing lakhs of rupees? (*Off the rack*, 22 — 28 March.) Only film stars, industrialists and blackmarketeers can buy such expensive clothes. No wonder there is an acute shortage of buyers. The fashion designers now have no other alternative but to change their profession.

Bhupen Bose, Calcutta (West Bengal)

■It isn't at all surprising that the fashion industry which took off with so much pomp in our country, has turned out to be a damp squib. Just because our fashion designers managed to hoodwink some sophisticates, they were living in a fool's paradise. Trying to market haute couture in a third world country like ours is preposterous. It would be a better idea to concentrate on exporting designer wear to countries where it sells. Our government should help these creative geniuses of our fashion industry by giving them adequate support to promote their designer clothes abroad.

Nalini Sudhakaran, Trivandrum (Kerala)

Biased view

The story *Cold comfort* (8 — 14 March) appears to have given a one-sided view. The authors mention some specific instances to say that medical care in these hospitals is sub-standard. While

medical negligence needs to be condemned even more than negligence in other fields, occasional human errors do happen even in the best of hospitals in the world.

The laymen and the elite forget the fact that the doctor-population ratio is awfully lopsided in India. This results in overburdening of the doctors who have to work without any regular holiday or time for their family and this fatigue sometimes leads to errors

The authors probably think that ethics is only for the medical profession and not for journalists. When they mention a few doctors by name with a view to tarnish their image, what prevented them from giving the version of the concerned doctors involved. Is not an "Investigation" required to be impartial?

It is condemnable if some doctors succumb to extraneous pressure and indulge in unnecessary investigations, but let me ask you — are there not journalists who succumb to similar pressures? Are there not journalists who write articles in return for favours?

R. Sridharan, Madras (Tamil Nadu)

Voters at a polling booth: political immaturity?

Bogus ballot

The story, *The instability factor* (22 — 28 March), speaks the truth and nothing but the truth. It is time we stop talking about the wisdom of India's illiterate voters and worry about the bankrupt vote-banks. The problem becomes acute when immature 18-year-olds are also given the right to exercise their franchise without training them on how to use it.

Lt Col V.V. Natu, Pune (Maharashtra)

Wooing Dalits

This refers to the story *At the helm* (12 — 18 April). Kushabhau Thakre's appointment as the BJP president must have brought cheer to the hard-core RSS. But the first signals given by Thakre are in keeping with the BJP's new policy to blend ideology with pragmatism. And he has also showed his keenness to woo the Dalits in a manner which is in keeping with the BJP's policy to broaden its social base.

Sunil Thakur, Patna (Bihar)

Blame it on Basha

The story of the Al Umma supremo S.A. Basha's threatening of a judge made sad reading (*Vengeance is ours*, 15 — 21 March). Basha's brazen courage must have stemmed from the state government's soft approach towards him and his extremist outfit.

Basha was arrested under TADA for his alleged involvement in the bomb attack on the RSS office in Madras in 1993. But he was released when the DMK government came to power in 1996. The Al Umma was allowed a free run in the state and the DMK government turned a blind eye even though it was aware of the militant outfit's anti-national activities.

S.A. Basha: accused of anti-national activities

A huge cache of arms and bombs was recovered from the house of Basha. If only the DMK government had banned Al Umma and not set Basha free, many innocent lives would have been saved.

L. Rohini, Tiruchy (Tamil Nadu)

Democracy be damned

This refers to the story *The great survivor* (8 — 14 March). The manner in which Kalyan Singh regained his chief ministership was a mockery of democracy. How shameless of him to say that 'it was a triumph of Indian democracy'. Singh may have demonstrated a unique survival instinct but the conscientious citizen would love to abhor and forget him as a leader.

G.P. Khanna, Kanpur (Uttar Pradesh)

Contributed by George J. Coelho, Bombay (Maharashtra)

MILESTONES

APPOINTED: Shyamal Dutta, as the new director of Intelligence Bureau, on 16 April. He is a 1965-batch IPS officer.

ACQUITTED: by Supreme Court, on 16 April, all the 11 persons sentenced to life imprisonment by the Tada court for allegedly burning six people to death during the Bombay riots.

DIED: Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot, on 15 April, in a jungle hut in

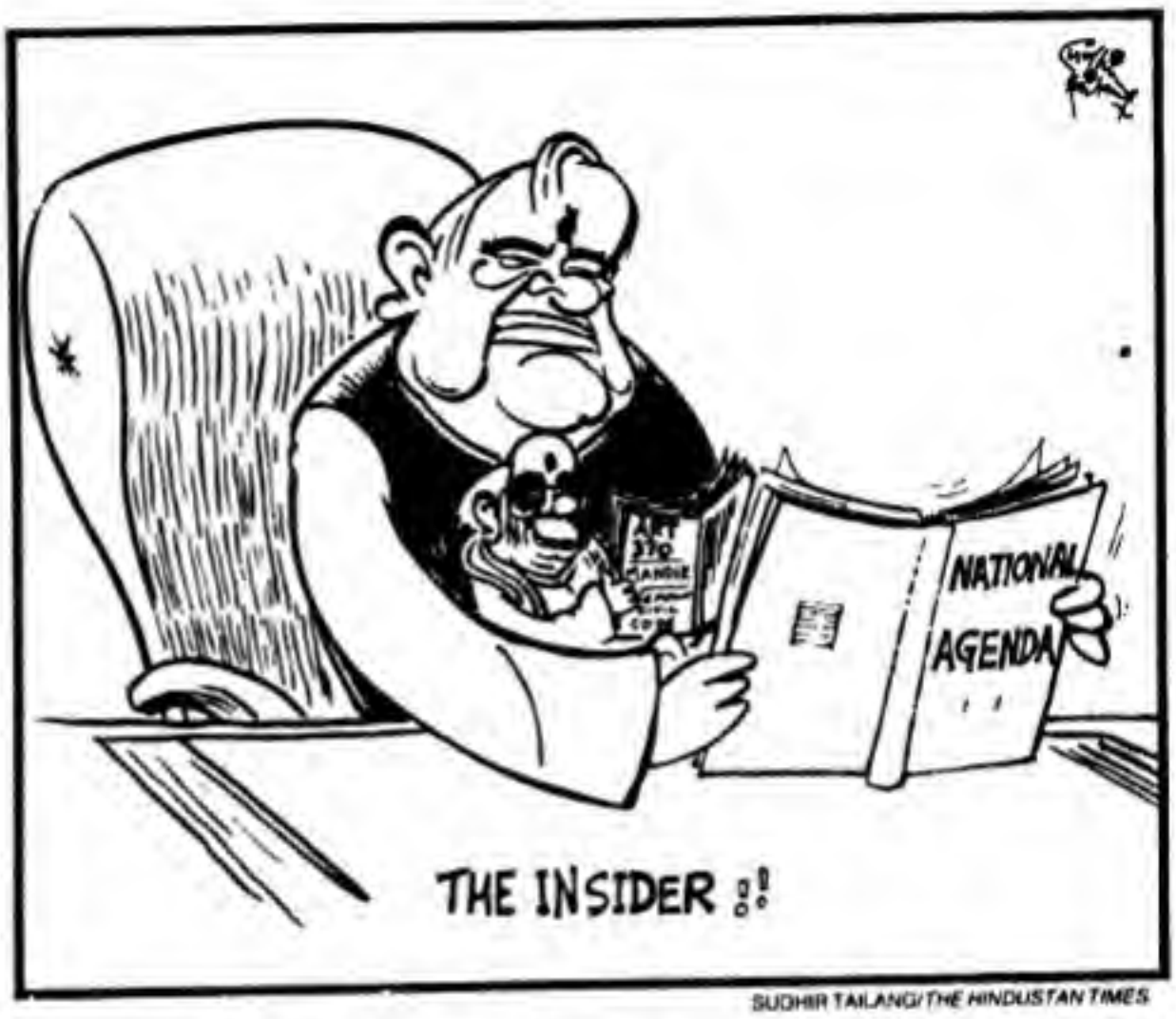
northern Cambodia, near the Thai border, where he was held in custody. He was 73.

NOMINATED: Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, for the Mother Teresa Award, 1998, by the All-India Peace Council. The award will be given on 5 September, the day Mother Teresa passed away.

APPOINTED: P.G. Mankad, as secretary in the information and broadcasting ministry. Mankad, a 1964-batch IAS officer, took over from C.R. Kamalanathan.

NOMINATED: Jeelani Bano, Indian writer in Urdu, for the Majlis-e-Farogh-e-Urdu Award for 1998. Bano will share the award with Pakistan's Intizar Hussain.

SIGHT & SOUND



SUDHIR TAILANG/THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

■ I am not pleading for or against *swadeshi*. Nor am I pleading against reforms or liberalisation. I am just in a hurry to utilise the Indian market for Indians.

SIKANDER BAKHT, *Union industry minister, ruling out the disbanding of the Foreign Investment Promotion Board*

■ There cannot be one set of rules for the AIADMK and another for other parties. Whatever applies to Mr Muthiah should apply to others in the Union council of ministers.

J. JAYALALITHA, *AIADMK leader, briefing media in Madras*

■ ***Swadeshi* is not anti-globalisation. It is an attitude of the mind, suggesting nationalism and patriotism. It exhorts people to work harder for the country and to place nation before self.**

YASHWANT SINHA, *Union finance minister, in a meeting in New York, organised by India-America Chamber of Commerce*

■ Law alone cannot be a remedy to social injustices.

KUSHABHAU THAKRE, *after being elected BJP president unopposed*

■ The government is not going to run the party. It is the party which will have to run the government.

ATAL BEHARI VAJPAYEE, *Prime Minister, in his concluding address at the two-day BJP national executive meeting*

■ I like my personal space and I will not share it with anyone.

SUSHMITA SEN, *former Miss Universe and film actress*

SEEN

HERITAGE RECLAIMED

Restorers work wonders with Calcutta's Town Hall

TARAPADA BANNERJEE

RESURRECTION: *the Town Hall after the repairs*

The walls had ears. The gleaming building beamed with pride as Calcutta's *cognoscenti* walked up its grand steps, filed past its Corinthian columns and entered the sprawling hall where English ladies and their elegant partners had once danced through the city's balmy summer nights. On 15 April, the Bengali New Year's Day, Calcuttans gathered at the historic Town Hall to celebrate its new life, as a major restoration project revived its past glory.

The Town Hall, built around 1815, was not only a splendid landmark of Calcutta's architectural heritage but also hosted some of the momentous assemblies that form part of this city and India's intellectual lineage. Here, Calcuttans had mourned the death of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, the father of modern Bengali prose; Henry Derozio had lectured passionately to trigger the Bengal Renaissance; Jagadish Chandra Bose demonstrated his experiments with electric waves; meetings were held to protest the 1905 plan to partition Bengal; and, on his 50th birthday, the city came to felicitate Rabindranath Tagore.

Yet, a building so steeped in history was allowed to go to ruins after Independence by people who swore by the past. Even ten years back this princely building wept. Its plaster had peeled, forming gangrenous sores of exposed bricks. Water from leaking pipes seeped into its cornices and dampened its walls. Trees spread their medusan tentacles from the rooftop. Inside, the historic hall had been partly turned into a godown for rotting High Court files and partly into cage-like cubicles to house ugly municipal offices.

In 1980, the wisemen of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation had even decided to pull down the Town Hall to make room for a grotesque mordern building. But an outcry from historians, architects and conservationists halted the CMC's mindless demolition brigade.

Then, in 1990, amidst celebrations of Calcutta's tercentenary, A Homage Trust was formed to preserve Calcutta's architectural relics. The CMC, by now a little wiser, requested the trust to restore the Town Hall. In the 19th century, the building's construction had been financed out of the proceeds of a public lottery; now its restoration, too, was to be done with public funds.

To raise money, the trust auctioned 24 Bikash Bhattacharya paintings that fetched Rs 1.15 crore under the hammer.

Today, the Town Hall stands restored to its former glory and testifies to the skill of Indian architects and engineers. Almost every inch has had to be done up again, and as one enters its now impeccable portals, voices from the past seem to echo in the colonnaded hall.

What will become of it now? Jyoti Basu would like it to be made into a world-class art gallery, a facility that the city badly lacks. And that would be in the fitness of things as well. After all, the Town Hall has got a fresh lease of life from the money art fetched. •

Anish Gupta/Calcutta

Almost every inch had to be done up again. As one enters its now impeccable portals, voices from the past seem to echo in the colonnaded hall

VIR SANGHVI

MINISTERS AND CROOKS

When does a politician lose the right to hold office?

This is probably the most incorrect thing I'm going to write all year but I have to say it nevertheless: I agree with Jayalalitha. I think she has raised an important point and I think we are being foolish in attacking her on political grounds while missing the substantial issue that she has addressed.

Jayalalitha's concern is with S. Muthiah, an AIADMK MP who resigned as minister for surface transport once charges were framed against him by a Madras court. According to Jayalalitha, she asked him to resign once it became clear that the BJP government regarded his continuance in the Cabinet as an embarrassment.

Her supporters say that she acted properly but it was unfair to have singled out Muthiah when there are other members of the ministry who continue in office despite facing criminal prosecutions. They have in mind Buta Singh, a renegade Congressman whose prosecution was ordered by the Supreme Court last Friday. But they also include all those BJP leaders who have been charge-sheeted in the Ayodhya case. This list includes L.K. Advani, Uma Bharti, Dr Murli Manohar Joshi and others.

Jayalalitha's point is simple enough: you say that a man accused of crime cannot be a minister; fine, I agree — but what about all the others who continue in the ministry even after my Muthiah has resigned?

It is not enough to respond — as most of us have done — by saying that she is a temperamental woman who wants to bring down this government. Perhaps she is and perhaps she isn't.

But the issue remains valid: when does it become improper for a man to continue in office?

The most recent precedent was set — ah, sweet irony of life! — by Narasimha Rao when his CBI filed the Havala charge-sheets. He insisted that all charge-sheeted ministers resign, even before the court had framed charges. Of those in the Opposition so charged, (a list that includes the current home minister and finance minister) only L.K. Advani — who had obviously

Jayalalitha's point is simple enough: you say that a man accused of crime cannot be a minister; fine, I agree — but what about all the others who continue in the ministry even after my Muthiah has resigned?

Jayalalitha with Vajpayee (on her left) and other coalition partners

been framed — had the guts to go a step further. He declared that he would withdraw from electoral politics until he had been exonerated.

Narasimha Rao took heart from Advani's gesture and promptly withdrew all charge-sheeted Congressmen from electoral politics by the simple expedient of unilaterally denying them party tickets. Many rebelled and stood anyway. Some, like Kalpnath Rai won and others like Kamal Nath got their wives elected.

At the time, there was a huge debate on the issue. Everybody agreed that the charge-sheeted ministers should resign but there was no unanimity on the morality of denying them tickets. The Janata Dal and the BJP did not follow the Congress' lead, arguing that a man is innocent till he's proven guilty. On the whole, the electorate tended to agree.

That is roughly where the consensus has remained over the last two years. When the United Front came to power, Sharad Yadav was denied a ministry because he had been charge-sheeted in Havala but this did not stop the Janata Dal from making him president. Oddly enough, even Narasimha Rao seems to subscribe to the new consensus and not to the views he held as Prime Minister. Even though he has been charge-sheeted in a host of cases, he still expected to get a Congress ticket this year.

The confusion has arisen after the last election. The BJP alliance did not subscribe to the view that charge-sheeted individuals could not be made ministers. Muthiah had already been charge-sheeted when he was made surface transport minister and Buta Singh, who was involved in the JMM bribery case, bargained for a Cabinet ministry in return for supporting the BJP.

In the states, the situation was even worse. Sukh Ram, who epitomises the crooked politician in the public mind, was expelled from the Congress, formed his own party and held the balance of power in the Himachal Assembly. To gain office, the BJP won Sukh Ram over and when he gets elected from Mandi, he will expect to be made a minister.

As far as I can see, the only issue of principle in the Muthiah case is that he could not continue in office once charges had been framed. This is a slightly bizarre principle (to the extent that it is a principle at all). The man had been charge-sheeted when he was made a minister. Of course, charges were going to be framed.

But even if you accept this argument, there are problems. What do you do about all the BJP leaders who are named in the Ayodhya case? In that matter, charges were filed even *before* they were sworn in.

You have two escape routes. One: you say that the principle only applies to corruption cases. This is a dangerous precedent because its logical extension is that a murderer can become a minister but that a thief can't. And though I, personally, have no doubt that the likes of Advani and Dr Joshi were not involved in the Babri Masjid demolition, matters of principle cannot be decided on the basis of individual belief. Moreover, there is no shortage of people who will claim that a man who destroys a place of worship and causes riots is morally no better than a man who takes a bribe.

That leaves the second escape route. You say that the principle does not apply when the cases are obviously false and filed by vindictive governments. You could make such a claim about the Ayodhya charge-sheet but there are two new problems. Firstly, Advani claimed that the Havala case was obviously false and filed by a vindictive Narasimha Rao but he withdrew from electoral politics anyway. In the interests of consistency, can he take a different stand on Ayodhya?

There is another problem. 'Obviously false case...vindictive government...' Where have we heard these phrases before? Why, from Jayalalitha of course. Her view is that all the cases against the AIADMK are frame-ups engineered by M. Karunanidhi and P. Chidambaram. If you let the BJP off the hook on Ayodhya, then aren't you obliged to do the same for the AIADMK on corruption cases?

It is not my case that crooks should be made ministers. Nor is it my case that Advani and Dr Joshi should resign (though I won't shed any tears for Buta Singh).

My point is a little more basic. We are now in a situation where more and more politicians are being charge-sheeted: either because they are dishonest or because of vindictive governments.

We need to evolve a consensus on how such politicians are to be treated. But instead of doing that, we are taking the easy way out and getting self-righteous about Jayalalitha. •

DO THEY HAVE AN ESCAPE ROUTE?

L.K. Advani

M.M. Joshi

Buta Singh

Uma Bharti

More and more politicians are being charge-sheeted: either because they are dishonest or because of vindictive governments. We need to evolve a consensus on how such politicians are to be treated

Bridging the gap

The Prime Minister reaches out to the people of Assam and the north-east

It was 15 April, Rangali Bihu, the first day of Assamese new year. The Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, inaugurated the long-awaited Naranarayan Setu rail-cum-road bridge at a mammoth gathering at Jogighopa.

Vajpayee underlined the need to bridge the gap between all sections of the society. He said that the new bridge — the second of its kind and the third over the Brahmaputra — would fulfil the long-standing demand of the people and also give an impetus to surface transport in Assam.

Appreciating the services of the railway engineers, Vajpayee said, "It is the outcome of 15 years of relentless effort of the technocrats." He, however, added that the "people in the state have a feeling that they are far off from the heart of Delhi, hence I have decided to visit the state first to remove the feeling of alienation".

The 2.284 km-long Naranarayan Setu has been built at a cost of Rs 300.92 crore of which the ministry of surface transport provided Rs 138.91 crore. The demand for the bridge first came up in 1955 when a memorandum was submitted to President Rajendra Prasad. The then chief minister, Sarat Chandra Sinha, also played a key role in justifying the need for its construction.

The foundation stone of the bridge was laid by Indira Gandhi on 11 November, 1983, but the actual work started only in 1987 after the completion of the Kaliabhomora bridge, the second one over the Brahmaputra.

Named after the legendary Koch king, Naranarayan, the *setu* will provide a link between National Highway 31 on the north bank and National Highway 37 on the south bank of the river. It will not only give a boost to the economy of the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, but also to the whole of the north-east.

In the past, the region has suffered on several occasions when its only link with the rest of the country was snapped due to natural calamities or disruptive activities. Now, it has got an alternative route.

The day before the inauguration, Vajpayee attended the Bihu festival at Latasil ground. He was the second Prime Minister to do so after Jawaharlal Nehru. "It is not that I have come to your state during the time of festivities, I shall also be here with you in your time of distress," said Vajpayee.

"It is not that I have come to your state during the time of festivities, I shall also be here with you in your time of distress," said Vajpayee

The Prime Minister announced that his government was committed to holding talks with the insurgents of the north-east for the restoration of peace. But at the same time, he asserted that all talks would be held within the "four corners of the Constitution of India".

Appealing to militants to come forward for talks — whether conditional or unconditional — the PM said if a suggestion for amendment of the Constitution came up in course of the discussions, the government would consider it.

Vajpayee assured the state's Asom Gana Parishad government that the Centre would take steps to implement the special economic packages for the north-east announced by the earlier Union governments. He, however, did not commit himself on the demand for waiving Assam's central loans to help tide over its financial crisis. •

Dileep Chandan/Guwahati

INDER MALHOTRA

Of vital importance

The National Security Council should be an integral part of the government

At long last, something is being done to form a National Security Council (NSC) worth the name. The formation by the Prime Minister of a three-member 'task force' has been widely welcomed because of its composition and apt terms of reference. From all accounts, it also appears that the task force will submit its report within 100 days.

Thereafter, the Vajpayee government will have to work equally fast to set up the NSC. Otherwise, the present attempt to put into place a suitable mechanism to take integrated, coordinated and sound decisions on problems of national defence and security, with the participation of all the relevant departments, ministries, the armed forces, intelligence agencies *et al* will go the way of previous exercises of its kind and end up in a fiasco.

To his credit, the first Prime Minister to form an NSC was V.P. Singh, who had done a short stint as defence minister before leaving Rajiv Gandhi's Cabinet. But this was neatly sabotaged by his top and trusted bureaucrats, headed by the then Cabinet secretary, Vinod Pande. In any case, VP's NSC met only once and then went out of existence.

Chandra Shekhar, who lasted only four months, had no time for an NSC. His priorities were different. P.V. Narasimha Rao, true to type, promised to set up an NSC at least once a year, every year, but throughout his five-year tenure, did nothing about it. Since there never was a security council in Karnataka, H.D. Deve Gowda had no clue about the subject. Anyhow, the 'humble farmer' was ousted by Sitaram Kesri soon enough.

Gowda's successor, Inder Kumar Gujral, also did not last long. But he had a grasp of the inadequacies of the present pattern of ad hoc and compartmentalised decision-making on complex and wide-ranging issues of security in a comprehensive sense. Even so, he allowed himself to be persuaded that instead of an NSC, a National Security Advisory Council will do.

According to the scheme formulated in his days, the eight-man advisory body was to consist of Raja Ramanna, former chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, R. Narasimhan, also a retired technocrat, K. Subrahmanyam, former defence production secretary as well as former director of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, Muchkund Dubey, a former foreign secretary, D.C. Pathak, a former director of the Intelligence Bureau, Air Commodore (retd) J. Singh, director of IDSA, Rakesh Mohan, formerly economic adviser to industry minister, and N.N. Vohra, then principal secretary to the PM.

Mercifully, this hare-brained idea was immediately shot down, ironically by some of those invited to be members of the proposed advisory council. However, it was in this context that misgivings arose when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government's agenda declared that the NSC of its vision would also be an advisory body. It is greatly to be hoped that K.C. Pant, a former defence minister, Jaswant Singh, currently deputy chairman of the Planning Commission but a man well-versed in security issues, and Jasjit Singh will realise that the NSC should either be an integral part of the government or not at all.

Another idea that needs to be given a decent but hurried burial is the pernicious and persistent proposal that the NSC should be serviced by the Joint Intelligence Committee. This is the glaring mistake V.P. Singh had made. It must not be repeated. The NSC must have a "dedicated" secretariat suitably manned. More on this subject will have to be said later. •

V.P. Singh: the first PM to form an NSC

A.B. Vajpayee: forming a task force

I.K. Gujral: allowed himself to be misled

Narasimha Rao: always promised to set up an NSC

Signs of

Jayalalitha is sore over the Centre's refusal to dismiss

Love her or hate her, but you cannot afford to ignore the lady of Poes Garden. Jayalalitha Jayaram, the former Tamil Nadu chief minister and AIADMK supremo, is proving to be a difficult customer for Vajpayee and his government. Vajpayee's coalition government depends on the 27 MPs of the AIADMK and its allies for survival. Sheer expediency and vagaries of the numbers game have allowed Jayalalitha to do some back-seat driving in Delhi. She has set her agenda and at the moment is pursuing it doggedly regardless of the resistance by the BJP.

The Jayalalitha style is to combine charisma with ruthlessness. She believes that the AIADMK-BJP combine won 30 out of the 39 seats in Tamil Nadu because of her personal charisma and the BJP rode piggyback on her. It was a love-hate relationship between the AIADMK and the BJP right from the beginning.

And before the government was formed, she had declared that she was totally disillusioned with the BJP leadership. But after BJP envoy Jaswant Singh assuaged her hurt ego, she agreed to join the government and got important portfolios.

After her failed attempt to get the finance ministry for her foe-turned-ally Subramanian Swamy, she did manage to wrest banking and revenue for her confidant R.K. Kumar. In fact, the BJP reluctantly agreed to bifurcate the finance ministry so that Kumar could have independent charge of banking and revenue. It was a shameless thing to do, but the BJP was helpless. For Jayalalitha, independent charge for Kumar of the crucial departments would mean that FERA cases against her friend Sasikala could be watered down.

But her single-point agenda from the beginning has been the dismissal of the Karunanidhi government. She wants the DMK government to be sacked as she feels there are enough reasons for the use of Article 356 including breakdown of law and order.

Jayalalitha believes that if Assembly elections are held in the near future, she will come back to power. So, she is irritated by the BJP's stance on Article 356 because she came to power in 1991 when the AIADMK and its then ally, the Congress, pressured the minority Chandra Shekhar regime at the Centre to dismiss the Karunanidhi government on the [illegible] issue.

There has been a sea change since then in relation to the use of Article 356. The Supreme Court has laid down that a state Assembly coming under President's Rule cannot be dissolved until the presidential proclamation is approved by Parliament. Added to that a 'constitutionally correct' President like K.R. Narayanan and the numerical constraints of the Vajpayee regime make the use of the provision almost impossible. However, Jayalalitha does not care for constitutional propriety.

Jayalalitha's hopes for a quick action plan against Karunanidhi were belied by Vajpayee's unequivocal declaration in the Rajya Sabha that his government would not misuse Article 356 and that it had no intention of dismissing the Karunanidhi regime. And when she came to know that her arch-rival Karunanidhi was trying to establish a rapport with the BJP government, she was furious. She criticised Karunanidhi for "talking highly of the BJP's policy" after having attacked that party during the election campaign.

The BJP tried to soothe her ego by asking Union ministers from Tamil Nadu, Rangarajan Kumaramangalam and Vazhapadi Ramamurthy, to make noises hinting darkly of an impending "dismissal" of the DMK government.

So, Jayalalitha and her cohorts started

V. RAJAGOPAL

Jayalalitha with Advani and Vajpayee: taking the alliance for granted

strain

e DMK government in Tamil Nadu

"As long as Article 356 is there in the Constitution, the Centre has powers to dismiss a state government. And I and my party want the DMK government to be dismissed," says Jayalalitha

talking of the "countdown" having started for the DMK's dismissal. It has actually geared up all political parties in the state for a snap poll.

Fortunately for the BJP, the campaign for the Karunanidhi government's dismissal suffered a serious setback when Jayalalitha's trusted aide Sedapatti R. Muthiah had to resign as the Union surface transport minister.

A special court in Madras set up by the Karunanidhi government has framed charges against him for having "assets disproportionate to known source of income". Muthiah and his family members had acquired wealth totalling Rs 45.74 lakh, while he was the Tamil Nadu Speaker.

The charge sheet against Muthiah was readied by the state vigilance and anti-corruption directorate before he was inducted into Vajpayee's Cabinet. Everybody knew that the special court would sooner on later nail him and that

BIJOY GHOSH

S.R. Muthiah with Jayalalitha: "I will lay down my life for her"

he would become an embarrassment for the government.

But Jayalalitha dotes on him as he has been one of her most trusted men. When several AIADMK ministers deserted her following the party's rout in 1996, Muthiah remained with her. Muthiah is also loyal to Sasikala, for whom he had asked the then deputy speaker to vacate his chair at a function in the Assembly.

Muthiah refused to resign initially and said it was a "frame-up by Karunanidhi". As he was boarding a train for a

SCORP NEWS

Karunanidhi with Vajpayee: friend in need ?

Jayalalitha wrested independent charge of banking and revenue for her nominee R.K. Kumar so that FERA cases against her friend Sasikala (right) could be watered down

reception in his constituency Periyakulam, Muthiah said: "All cases against me are politically motivated. The Karunanidhi government will be dismissed."

But at midnight he was woken up and asked to alight at a wayside station and taken to Madras by car, so that he could catch the morning flight to Delhi and give his resignation to the Prime Minister.

Even though Jayalalitha protested, the Prime Minister insisted that Muthiah had to go. Later at Madras airport a peeved Muthiah said: "If Madam desires, I will lay down my life for her."

Later Jayalalitha seized the high moral ground and attempted to dress up Muthiah's resignation as an "example of the importance of maintaining probity in public life".

However, the BJP's euphoria over the resignation was short-lived as Jayalalitha embarrassed it further by naming C. Srinivasan, her party MP from Dindigul, as Muthiah's replacement. She said that Vajpayee had told her that there would be a Cabinet expansion and two more ministers of state from the AIADMK and the PMK would be accommodated.

A week after the Muthiah episode, Jayalalitha struck. She demanded that all ministers facing corruption charges should be dropped.

She made the demand while commenting on Subramanian Swamy's pointed reference as to how Buta Singh, Ramakrishna Hegde, George Fernandes and Ram Jethmalani could become ministers despite having charges against them or facing investigations.

Said an angry Jayalalitha, "There cannot be one set of rules for the AIADMK and another for other political parties. What applies to Muthiah should apply to all politicians and members of the Union Cabinet. We have set high standards in

M. Karunanidhi: getting a respite

public life and this should be followed."

Meanwhile, Karunanidhi has been keeping a low profile. After he met Vajpayee and Advani in Delhi early this month, he is confident that his ministry will not be disturbed.

According to local BJP leaders, the alliance with Jayalalitha is over for all practical purposes. The BJP feels that Karunanidhi will be a more stable ally in the long run. After the Jain Commission cleared the DMK in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case, Karunanidhi's stock has gone up. And with Moopanar almost certain to go back to Sonia Gandhi's Congress, the DMK may need the BJP.

Under pressure the BJP government sent special secretary, home, Ashok Kumar to Madras to assess the law-and-order situation. Asked if Kumar and his team would visit other parts of the state, he said, "It is not necessary to tour every inch of the state. I am here to review the law-and-order situation in consultation with the state government and such reviews are taking place all over the country where there have been incidents of bomb blasts." Later he gave a clean chit to the state government and dismissed suggestions of Tamil Nadu being a terrorist state.

Jayalalitha was bound to get upset with Kumar's comment. She questioned how could he assess the situation in a day without visiting the trouble spots. She iterated, "As long as Article 356 is there in the Constitution, the Centre has powers to dismiss a state government. And I and my party want the DMK government to be dismissed."

Karunanidhi was confident that his government would not be dismissed in view of the BJP's stand on the misuse of Article 356. "The fear of dismissal of the state government on the earlier Jain Commission report did not shake me. I think the BJP government at the Centre wants stability in states as well," he said. He got a further boost as BJP general secretary Venkaiah Naidu said in Madras, "As of now, there is not enough material evidence to dismiss the state government."

According to sources, TDP leader Chandrababu Naidu who is very close to the BJP leadership has assured Karunanidhi that his government will not be dismissed. Karunanidhi who considers Naidu as his "younger brother" is likely to go by his advice.

However, the BJP has made it clear that it will not give a clean chit to the DMK government regarding law and order. So, Karunanidhi is giving a free hand to his police after the serial bomb blasts in Coimbatore. Also, the huge cache of arms and explosives being seized every other day in different parts of the state reflects the sudden alertness of the police.

Jayalalitha has forced Vajpayee to sack Buta Singh. Now, she is demanding the immediate dismissal of the DMK government as elections to the Rajya Sabha from Tamil Nadu are scheduled in June

The clean chit given by the central team to the DMK government aggravated the situation. Ashok Kumar's observation about noticing nothing unusual on the Marina Beach and revealing his findings to the media before submitting them officially, showed the casualness of the BJP in this regard.

To assuage Jayalalitha's feelings, Advani said he was "displeased" with Kumar's handling of the situation and promised to send another fact-finding mission.

But the situation went out of control when urban development minister Ram Jethmalani made a veiled attack on Jayalalitha at a rally organised by commerce minister Ramakrishna Hegde in Bangalore. Jayalalitha asked the PM to drop ministers Buta Singh, Hegde and Jethmalani who had been either charge-sheeted or were facing criminal investigations.

The BJP, in a damage-control exercise, even asked Rajasthan CM Bhairon Singh Shekhawat to speak to 'godman' Chandra Swami to neutralise Jayalalitha's adviser Subramanian Swamy.

However, Jayalalitha forced Vajpayee to sack Buta Singh. Now, she is demanding the immediate dismissal of the DMK government. And she has reasons for the urgency: elections to the Rajya Sabha from Tamil Nadu are scheduled in June. •

Sreedhar Pillai/Madras

Boy George

Intrepid? Or plain irresponsible? George Fernandes, minister and veteran rebel, causes disquiet in the government by his plain-speaking

V RAJAGOPAL

Fernandes with Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee

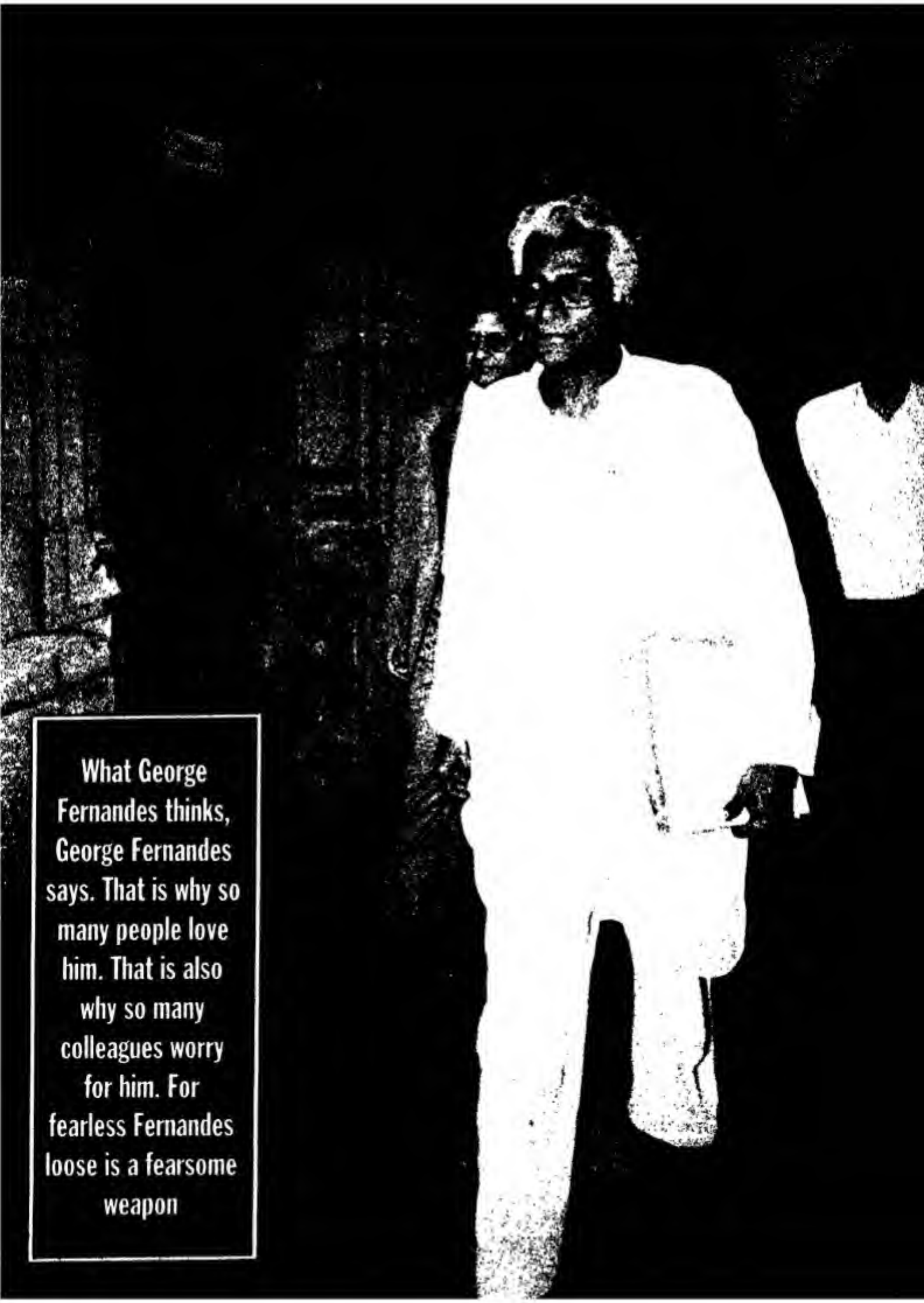
They were India's answer to the Men In Black — tubby little Haryanvis with regulation pudding-basin haircuts, trying to look inconspicuous in a crowd of secessionist, Tamil-jabbering Marxist-Leninists. "We're from the home ministry," one of them said, using the code-word for the CID, looking around suspiciously. "Can you tell us if there are any LTTE men here?"

It was a cold Sunday morning at Krishna Menon Marg, the winter of 1997. Vehement speeches were being made about the way Tamils were being butchered in Jaffna with official sanction from the Sri Lankan government. The host for the meeting was Samata Party chief George Fernandes.

The home ministry had pleaded with Fernandes to call it off, fearing that India-sponsored seminars on human rights violations in Sri Lanka could offend the Sri Lankan government. Fernandes had been adamant. Nothing would stop him from holding the seminar: if the home ministry thought he shouldn't, they should come and arrest him.

Reporters hung around waiting for something to happen. "Are they going to detain you?" one of them asked. George Fernandes, eyes glittering, said wistfully: "I wish they would."

They didn't. When the seminar closed that



What George Fernandes thinks, George Fernandes says. That is why so many people love him. That is also why so many colleagues worry for him. For fearless Fernandes loose is a fearsome weapon

V RAJAGOPAL

evening with incendiary resolutions expressing solidarity with the Tamils of Sri Lanka and flaying the Indian government for not doing enough to help them realise Eelam, Fernandes was happy but still restless. You could tell that if there was one thing he wanted, it was to get arrested for taking part in the Eelam struggle. His friends were exasperated. Wasn't it enough that the meeting had been held? Why did George constantly have to prove he was a thorn in the side of the establishment?

But that's George Fernandes.

When earlier this month he charged the Chinese government with building a helipad on Indian territory, an accusation doubly serious because the Indian minister of defence was making it, his colleagues sighed again. "If he goes on like this, the defence chiefs will just stop sending him files and send all papers directly to the Prime Minister," said a colleague.

Bansi Lal, chief minister of Haryana and former defence minister himself, felt strongly enough to announce he was going to call on Fernandes and remonstrate with him. A defence minister should be seen but not heard. As defence minister, Fernandes was being seen and heard more than any other minister in the government.

Fernandes is really the only one of the old-time socialists who can still be found, the flag aloft in his hand. Had he not supported the BJP, it would have been impossible for the party to have the acceptability it enjoys among the working classes

Such was the furore caused by Fernandes' charge that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had to contradict his defence minister and denied the existence of a Chinese helipad in Arunachal Pradesh. Gag orders went out on George Fernandes. Several high-level Chinese delegations were to visit India. Could he please put his views on China on hold until the delegations had returned?

"In 15 minutes, Mr Fernandes has undone five years' work done by the ministry of external affairs," lamented a former foreign secretary who had negotiated eight rounds of talks on the border issue. "What business do Tibetans have to disturb the peace and tranquillity in this country? We want to have good relations with the Chinese. Why should our foreign policy decisions be decided by the Tibetans?" asked Swaraj Kaushal, at one time George Fernandes' lawyer and a close friend.

But then what George Fernandes thinks, George Fernandes says. That is why so many people love him. That is also why so many colleagues worry for him. If it hadn't been for the fact that Fernandes has fought authority and hierarchy all his life, his friends say, they should have got together and appointed a 'minder' — for Fearless Fernandes loose is a fearsome weapon.

Politicians who have no ideological underpinnings and are concerned with power for itself, don't have to bother about social personas. They can be inconspicuous figures working from smoke-filled rooms, making calls and pulling strings.

But for a man like George Fernandes, politics is all this and much more. There have been so many strong influences on him that his social persona is an integration of all of them.

The Church was an important influence in the earlier years. Fernandes was born in Mangalore and his father wanted

him to be a priest. He was quite seriously inclined towards priesthood himself and while studying philosophy at St Peter's seminary, saw no contradiction in being part of a group that ransacked the office of the Socialist Party, because socialists were a bunch of godless atheists.

After the socialisation of the Church, it was the trade union movement. Fernandes came to Bombay when he was 20. 1950 was the year Hungary announced compulsory military training for students and China 'liberated' Tibet from the shackles of the 'feudal regime' of the Dalai Lama. In India, the Fifties was the era of egality and heroism, and the humid air of Bombay redolent with the smell of jasmine and the sounds of songs from films like *Pyaasa*, *Do Beegha Zameen* and *Mother India*.

In Bombay, the very young Fernandes met D'mello, a legend among trade union workers. D'mello was the president of the Bombay Labour Union. He quickly took Fernandes under his wing. This was Fernandes' most valuable education in the politics of organising. D'mello got so fond of him, and he internalised the owner-versus-worker dynamicsso well, that when D'Mello died, even before Fernandes could reach Bombay in time for the funeral, the workers decided that he should be their next

THE THIRD COMING

The three incarnations of G

1977-79: There are several [illegible] violence against the state when [illegible] charges that he collected [illegible]

Fernandes says he's opposed to [illegible] changes his mind and contents [illegible] famous as the Baroda dynamite [illegible] government.

For a few days, Fernandes becomes [illegible] is shifted to industry. He turns out [illegible]

1989-90: He is made minister for [illegible] Kashmir affairs, after home minister [illegible] daughter is kidnapped by [illegible]

Fernandes in Srinagar where he was [illegible] observer for the first-time-ever election in Kashmir, is happy at the charge he's given but the V.P. Singh government falls before he can bring Kashmir back to normalcy.

1990-1: The Samata Party performs [illegible] doesn't want to be a minister. The BJP [illegible] reluctance as an indication that [illegible] government from the outside.

But much to the relief of the BJP, Fernandes changes his mind and decides to become a minister after all. As defence minister, he is received with enthusiasm. But there is apprehension also—his contempt for ceremony and pomp worries the forces where ritual is an essential part of existence. But Fernandes dispels these fears. He reins in the bureaucracy and allows the forces to have their say.

It is too early to say what he will do next. But, so far, Fernandes has been the most vocal, articulate and active minister in the BJP government.

File picture of George Fernandes campaigning in Muzaffarpur

president.

One of the biggest trade unions in Bombay at the time was the Safai Kamgar Union, originallyledby B.R. Ambedkar. Working with this union, Fernandes learnt how to integrate the politics of caste, work and the socialist ethic. He went on organising workers — taxi drivers in Bombay became owners of taxies; with workers' funds, he founded the India Bank, the corpus of which is now crores of rupees; and he got into streetfights with the Shiv Sena, thugs whom millowners hired to break Fernandes-led unions.

In 1954, Fernandes met Ram Manohar Lohia. He was also befriended by another brilliant socialist. Madhu Limaye and his wife Champa adopted Fernandes — there was so much affection here that Champa paid more attention to Fernandes than to her own son. This was one relationship which would steer Fernandes through many crises.

Why did the Jana Sangh never gain a foothold in north India till the 1980s? Quite apart from the objective economic conditions of the north — the pattern of land holdings and the political and caste polarisation between the Congress and the socialists — it was also that the socialist movement had a stranglehold over the politics of UP and Bihar and never allowed the Jana Sangh to take root.

My friend, George saab

Nitish Kumar, president of the Samata Party, on what he likes most about his colleague George Fernandes

Friend? He's much more than that. He's a senior colleague, our leader, the force behind Samata Party.

When you see his eyes dancing, then you know that this man has a cosmic energy in him. He can do so many things in the span of 24 hours — he can campaign, he can give speeches, and, at night, he even has time to read and write.

I belong to that generation of socialists who heard and met Ram Manohar Lohia only a few times. I heard Lohia's public speech just once at the Gandhi Maidan in Patna. For us, persons like Madhu Limaye and George Fernandes were those who represented the socialist tradition.

Of course we belong to the same tradition. But I came really close to George saab when the Janata Dal was divided. At that time I was [illegible]. But when Laloo Yadav began his reign of terror there, [illegible] together, acting on Madhu Limaye's advice. The [illegible] given by Madhu Limaye.

I must say that much as I admired George saab, [illegible] question marks in my mind — like when he spoke in favour of the Morarji Desai government on the floor of the House, but voted against Charan Singh, leading to the collapse of the Janata Party government.

I have no reason to disbelieve him: he told me that Madhu Limaye thought that this was the right thing to do at that time, and he followed his elder mentor.

There have been so many strong influences on George Fernandes that his social persona is an integration of all of them

MADHU LIMAYE

RAM MANOHAR LOHIA

Nitish Kumar with George Fernandes

"He has all the makings of a Prime Minister. There are few people as talented as him around today"

there has been less pragmatism, more
has been a victim of this many times.
Minister. There are few people as talented as

apologise for treating him the way they

The socialists had these two states because they'd captured the peculiar indefinable character of politics of those days: their politics was rooted in life, not theory — the language they spoke, the words they used. Till today, George Fernandes' speeches — whether he speaks in English or Hindi — have a rootedness, a connection to the lives of the people he's talking to.

So with this kind of catholicity, how did Fernandes come to join hands with the BJP?

The answer goes back to 1978-79. Maybe, if he had pursued a different course of action, the choices he has made today would have been different.

In 1974, Fernandes gave a call for a long railway strike. In 1975, when the Emergency was declared, he went underground. This was an experience of a different sort. He was used to overground work. Underground politics was important but politically self-limiting. Fernandes had to appeal to the Socialist International and other countries to build up international support for the underground movement. There was no telling when the Emergency would be lifted. The underground movement had to be sustained.

He was arrested in Calcutta on 10 June, 1977. He contested the 1977 election from Muzaffarpur from jail. Morarji Desai made Fernandes minister for

Morarji Desai groomed Fernandes to be his number two

One action — keeping close company with Morarji Desai and then jumping ship to join Charan Singh — gave Fernandes the wholly-undeserved reputation of being a political grasshopper. He hasn't really lived that down since

communications, moving him to industry after a few days.

There were three socialists in those days who had towering personalities — the light of leadership shone out of their eyes. There was Raj Narain, who despite his unorthodox political tactics, had used the legal system to defeat Indira Gandhi the dictator; there was Sharad Yadav and Madhu Limaye who had quit their seats in Parliament, thereby leading by example; and there was Fernandes possibly the tallest leader in the underground.

All the leaders had a radicalising effect on politics. Raj Narain's concept and scheme of barefoot doctors was subverted by his complete absence of administrative acumen and by vested interests in the medical profession; Sharad Yadav got too involved in pettifoggery,

PET PEEVES

Things George Fernandes doesn't, will not, do

Iron his clothes: He washes his clothes himself. So he doesn't think it is necessary to iron them. Many believe that the crumpled kurta is an affectation. It isn't. It's just convenient.

Lose his temper: Hardly ever. If he doesn't agree with you, he will fall silent. If you're a close friend, he might argue. But he never shouts at the bureaucracy, never throws files around. Gets violently angry rarely, when he thinks India is being compromised.

He was on an election tour of south Bihar once when he spotted a statue of Subhash Chandra Bose, with a canopy on top which said 'Pepsi'. He commented to his companion that things had come to such a pass that multinationals were now obscuring leaders like Netaji. He then told the car to reverse and announced he was going to smash the canopy to bits. It took a lot of persuasion to get him to relent.

Condone people touching his feet and garlanding him: He says all this smacks of '*Congressvad*'.

Call anyone 'Sir', unless the person is much older: Fernandes called Morarji Desai, 'Morarji bhai'. He has never called his seniors in the party 'Sir'. By contrast, in the Congress, Rajiv Gandhi was always 'Sir'; and rather than 'Soniaji', for Congressmen, the current president of the Congress is 'Madam'.

Accept or give bribes: However adventurist Fernandes' politics might be, his honesty in financial matters is unimpeachable. This is one reason why he was made defence minister: because Vajpayee was sure that every rupee would be accounted for.

something that hasn't left him till today; and Fernandes grew from strength to strength.

Morarji Desai was demonstrative in his affection for this young man who had talent and an understanding of a range of political issues. Thus he could be trusted to be the minister-in-waiting for the Shah of Iran when he came to India on a state visit, as well as any other international dignitary.

It was clear to everyone who was observing politics in those days, that George Fernandes was being groomed by Morarji to be his number two. He could hold his own among other competent ministers as H.N. Bahuguna and Jagjivan Ram. In fact, they defined the benchmark in the Janata Party.

Therefore no one could understand what George Fernandes did in 1978-79. The Janata Party government was tottering — there was a rebellion by the Bharatiya Lok Dal chief Charan Singh, against the style of functioning of Morarji Desai. Efforts were made to save the situation but the Janata Party had so many constituents that it wasn't possible to keep everyone happy.

Fernandes protesting the US attack on Iraq

When the issue of the Jana Sangh keeping on the membership of the RSS was raised, George Fernandes realised that his continuance in the government may not be tenable any more. While the Jana Sangh element had the strength of the RSS movement, Fernandes was lonely among socialists who were so individualistic that the erstwhile Praja Socialist Party (PSP) members could not see eye to eye with him. And the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) elements were not strong enough to provide an RSS-type support to him.

It was Madhu Limaye who insisted that Fernandes jettison Morarji Desai. Few persons except his closest friends know that Fernandes was not happy about doing this. He was totally opposed to supporting Charan Singh. But Limaye was his mentor, his ideal. He had to give in to him.

It is a measure of Fernandes' political generosity that he never let this be known publicly, and accepted that whatever mistakes he had made were his own. The fact is that that one action — keeping close company with Morarji Desai and then jumping ship to join Charan Singh — gave him the wholly undeserved reputation of being a political grasshopper.

He hasn't really lived that down since. The collapse of the Janata government was a betrayal of socialists by socialists. But because Fernandes was seen to be one of the tallest ones, his moves were the target of a bitter attack by those he had grown up with.

But the charge of being a political dilettante has stuck, although Fernandes is really the only one of the old-time socialists who can still be found, the flag aloft in his hand. There is also no doubt that had he not supported the BJP, it would have been impossible for the party to have the acceptability it enjoys among the working classes.

Why did Fernandes go with the BJP? At a meeting in Bombay, veteran socialist Mrinal Gore pointed out cruelly that it was only with the help of the BJP and the Shiv Sena, that George Fernandes, a Christian, could ever aim to be the number one. In 1994, in a signed article, Surendra Mohan, on the national executive of the Janata Dal, warned Fernandes about the consequences of going with the RSS, which was praising his patriotism.

Fernandes never shouts at the bureaucracy, never throws files around. Gets violently angry rarely, when he blows hot in his controlled

Fernandes at the controversial convention expressing solidarity with the Tamil Eelam in December '97, New Delhi

Fernandes says he is not prepared to give up issues of democracy and secularism just because the government doesn't support them

THE CHINA CONTROVERSY

Facts of the case

George Fernandes believes the Tibetan people's struggle for their homeland must be supported.

Fine. But the fact is that the Chinese have an ongoing dispute with India over the boundary. So what should have primacy: the resolution of that dispute or the fight for the Tibetan homeland?

Ministry of external affairs officials say flatly that if there is a helipad where George Fernandes says there is, it has been there before the process of normalisation of Sino-Indian relations began.

Moreover, any mention of Chinese expansion can only derail relations between India and China.

Fernandes says he is not prepared to give up issues of democracy and secularism just because the government doesn't support them.

You decide who's right.

Maybe it is wrong to view Fernandes as part of the *sangh*. But it is doubtful if he realises how the RSS plans to use him. While for him and the Samata Party, it is a question of political survival, the fact also is that the RSS realised early on that George Fernandes would have to be demolished/co-opted at one or other point. After the Emergency, it was the same Atal Behari Vajpayee and the RSS-led by Nanaji Deshmukh, who spread rumours that George Fernandes was the agent of a big business house. This was after K.K. Birla had offered, in the presence of witnesses, to help him and Fernandes had turned down the offer.

But Fernandes is 68 now, and is growing older, though his critics say, not necessarily wiser. He is politically lonely. Socialism couldn't protect or support him but he has strength and presence — he spent Rs 62 lakh in this election, taking loans and contributions from workers. In fact, in terms of clean white money, he's one of the richest politicians in India today.

He needs to make it now. On the other hand, his disappointed admirers wonder how he's going to make it when the Samata Party sends letters to the President of India, assuring him they will not put up criminals in the elections, and then support the likes of Prabhunath Singh and Ashok Samrat, both known to have cases against them in Bihar.

History will judge George Fernandes and his peers. But the judgement of his colleagues is that in the matter of support to the BJP, and in his vision of changing society, Fernandes has let them down. They're honest enough to accept that may be the socialists have let him down. But the fact is Fernandes promised everyone he would change society. Dramatics are no substitute. •

Aditi Phadnis/New Delhi and Naved Zahir/Patna

Arms and the Man

George Fernandes has a real chance to revive the sagging morale of the services

At last India has a full-fledged, working defence minister in George Fernandes. Not since the days of the redoubtable Krishna Menon who, many service officers at the time thought, was on an esoteric ideological trip, has the ministry of defence (MoD) had a person gifted with equal intellect, administrative acumen, written and spoken fluency, and most of all, political clout.

But unlike Menon, Fernandes will not be sadistic or sarcastic, neither play politics or favourites and can never be contemptuous of generals and admirals. People hope the only reminder of Krishna Menon will be the road on which the new defence minister has been living.

Who would ever have thought 3, Krishna Menon Marg would get the facelift it has. Last week, through a quirk of fate, pacifist, human-rights activist, anti-establishmentarian and messiah of the underdog Fernandes hosted on the lawns a reception for gallantry award-winners of the armed forces. It is only the outside of the ministerial bungalow that has been renovated for the time being.

Fernandes was the last person the services expected to be their defence minister. All they knew about him was that he was a socialist, a trade-union leader, an accused in the Baroda dynamite case and generally a maverick. Not many in the forces knew of his strong feelings for restoration of human rights and democracy in Tibet, Burma and Bhutan.

Fifty years after Independence, defence and national security will be coming of age in India under a BJP-led government and a firebrand leader

And no one knew that in a wing of his house lived student leaders from Burma.

It was Fernandes who had the fellow-Konkan and former chief of army staff Gen. S.F. Rodrigues hauled over the coals in Parliament in 1992 for his reference in a newspaper interview to 'better governance' and calling some countries 'bandicoots'. Soon after taking over as defence minister, he was quick to tick off the Srinagar valley corps commander, Lt-Gen. Krishan Pal, for exceeding his mandate on sensitive politico-operational subjects.

After his first 30 days in office, the feeling forming in the services is of a minister serious about his job, set to learn the tricks of the trade. This development is all the more welcome given the notorious truancy of his predecessor's regime who spent all his time in his constituency employing the extended range of defence facilities for advancement of his political agenda. De facto he was more powerful than the Prime Minister. His party's gains were the military's losses.

Politically, the defence portfolio is a relatively safe job compared with finance, foreign or home ministries. Most Prime Ministers have retained the post assisted by ministers of state. None of the Cabinet ministers in the past had any professional clue about the job and very few were interested in on-the-job training. After 1971, the one person with some background and nose for the job was Arun Singh, minister of state for defence in Rajiv Gandhi's government.

Arun Singh brought some sense and order to the ministry, involved the chiefs of staff in decision-making and while highlighting the element of military power, restored the spirit and confidence of the military machine. But he was forced to resign, partly due to the Bofors recoil.

Fernandes has a real chance to revive the sagging morale of the services struck by political and bureaucratic interference and the unprecedented unrest in the IAF due to the inept handling of the Fifth Pay Commission. He has made the right moves: held briefings by service chiefs, defence secretaries and PSUs, revived the defence minister's morning meetings, and after nearly 20 years, the monthly meeting of the defence minister's committee.

The air-dash to the avalanche-stricken Thangu transit camp below the north Sikkim plateau, operational tour of the north-east, visit to army and IAF desert formations in Rajasthan and his maiden address at the biennial army commanders' conference have made an impressive snapshot of the country's new defence minister.

Fernandes has also had his first ride on a T 72 tank, sat in the cockpit of the Sukhoi and hitch-hiked a truckride in the desert. On a visit to a forward post on the border, he traded his Kolhapuri *chappals* for size 9 ammunition boots and insisted on walking to the post. Wherever he went, he met the soldiers, drank mugfuls of tea and discussed with them issues of their concern.

Fernandes is at his articulate best when meeting the press and media. He clearly of the Pakistan-China nexus and China being the mother of Ghauri, Chinese presence in Burma and its support for insurgents in the north-east, growing Chinese military presence in Tibet and the nuclear threat to Indian security and repeated border intrusions including Chinese claims over Arunachal Pradesh. In less than one month, he has told the Chinese what the Indian security forces feel about the excruciatingly slow pace of border talks. And on Chinese terms.

What Fernandes has not spoken about is the spectrum of defence and national security issues, obviously not wishing to pre-empt the strategic defence review.

Arun Singh: brought some sense and order to the ministry

Krishna Menon (right) with Nehru: many service officers at the time thought that he was on an esoteric ideological trip

does not need to look over his shoulder for help from defence ministry officials as was the practice not so long ago. But Fernandes has to learn aimed-firing rather than shooting from the hip as he is prone to do. Echoing the views of the army chief, he said the army should not be used in counter-insurgency operations, since soldiers are not meant to be employed against their own people. Making a bid for higher defence allocation, he added that the army should be reimbursed the cost of aid to civil authority.

What has impressed servicemen most is his courageous plain-speaking on China regarding India's legitimate security concerns. Never before has any politician dared to tell the Chinese what they should have been told at least 20 years ago. He has spoken His immediate task is to restore the confidence of the troops and officers in the system and help build their rapport with the MoD, ending their traditional adversarial relationship.

Fernandes is deeply committed to austerity and is its foremost practitioner. The military are poor managers of money and huge spenders on unproductive activities. Fernandes can teach them some *swadeshi* in this.

The armed forces have high expectations of Fernandes. Fifty years after Independence, defence and national security will be coming of age in India under a BJP-led government and a firebrand leader. Thirty years after he joined politics, the greatness of George Fernandes may come from defence — peace from strength. •

Maj. Gen. Ashok K. Mehta/New Delhi

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Warring

The feud between UP chief minister Kalyan Singh and state party president Raj Nath Singh might cost the BJP dearly

DHEERAJ DHAWAN

Six months back when Kalyan Singh and Raj Nath Singh got together to stage a political coup on the BSP and the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, they shot into limelight as the formidable BJP duo that heralded the saffron brigade's return to power after a long gap of four years and nine months.

The two seemed inseparable. And with the help of Speaker Kesri Nath Tripathi who put his stamp of approval on all their actions, they won in the game of realpolitik in which the BJP was regarded a novice.

Undeniably it was Raj Nath's political prowess and hold over his community that drew over a dozen Thakur MLAs of the Congress to cross over and side with the BJP. Likewise, it was Kalyan's concerted efforts that helped in cultivating the Dalits and the backwards in the BSP to cross floors. Their bonhomie also helped the BJP to win a record number of 57 seats in the Lok Sabha elections.

This left Kalyan's detractors high and dry. But when Loktantrik Congress chief Naresh Agarwal and Jagdambika Pal made an attempt to upstage him, his opponents in the BJP began to spread the word that it was the result of Kalyan's "inaccessibility and arrogance".

Once again the same charge is being levelled against the chief minister. But what seems to have given credence to the allegation is a nod by none other than the state BJP president, Raj Nath Singh. The two leaders who had been working hand in hand have now come face to face with each other.

But what was it that gave spark to this infighting? A rather petty cause that was played up to hurt the bloated egos of both the leaders. While a cold war had already started between the two leaders, things came to a head following a Kshatriya Sammelan (Kshatriya conference).

The *sammelan* was organised by MLC Ajit Singh. Raj Nath Singh was treated as a mere invitee. On the other hand, Kalyan, who belongs to the backward Lodhi Rajput community, was made the chief guest.

This became a bit too much for Raj Nath. He not only ensured that most of the Thakur ministers and MLAs kept away from the meet but also remarked: "I do not believe in such community meets because they simply breed more casteism which is the bane of modern society." This evoked sharp reactions from the organisers. Some of them even called Raj Nath "Jai Chand", the Thakur who betrayed the legendary Rajput king, Prithviraj Chauhan.

There had already been some bad blood between Kalyan and Raj Nath over transfers and postings.

While quite a few of Raj Nath's recommendations were readily complied with, many went unheeded, presumably on account of other pressures. In certain cases where Kalyan conceded the state party chief's demand, the "uncomfortable" bureaucrat was provided an equally important slot elsewhere.

The upright district magistrate of Kanpur, Prabhat Kumar, was transferred at the instance of Raj Nath Singh, who was known to have publicly humiliated the officer. He was, however, given the more important position of vice-chairman of the Lucknow Development Authority.

Here the chief minister managed to kill two birds with one stone. Another of his detractors, housing and urban development minister Lalji Tandon, wanted his aide Diwakar Tripathi to be given the prized job.

Kalyan had all along been only too obliging to his Cabinet colleagues, Kalraj Mishra and Lalji Tandon. Although both were critical of him, he not only chose to turn a blind eye to the goings-on

DHEERAJ DHAWAN

Raj Nath (left) was irked by being a mere invitee at a Kshatriya conference where Kalyan was the chief guest. The two also fell out over transfers and postings of bureaucrats

chieftains

in their departments, but also allowed them to have their way in transfers and postings.

Now that they have all ganged up against him, the chief minister has decided to retaliate. In the bargain, quite a few of Raj Nath's blue-eyed boys came under fire. Prominent among them was one of the three officers who had been voted the "most corrupt" by members of the state IAS association.

Taking advantage of the situation, Mishra, Tandon and Rajesh Pandey, an MLA, joined Raj Nath's camp. At their instance, a couple of other BJP MLAs who had failed to get a berth in the 95-member ministry, took the matter to the party bosses in New Delhi, only to be snubbed by the latter.

In fact, the issues raised by them had already been discussed threadbare with Sunder Singh Bhandari, who is in charge of party affairs in the state. Both Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and home minister L.K. Advani disapproved of the tactics adopted by the MLAs. They were reportedly told in no uncertain terms that "Kalyan would continue" and warned that any repeat of such dissidence would be treated as anti-party activity.

Even his strong connections with the RSS did not help Raj Nath Singh to elicit much support. Suresh Rao Ketkar, in charge of the RSS state unit, is understood to have advised him to lie low and not get worked up over petty issues.

This came as a shock to both Raj Nath and his supporters, Kalraj Mishra and Lalji Tandon. BJP circles are also agog with speculation that Mishra and Tandon were mainly worried about being linked with the Rs 100-crore Ambedkar Park scandal in which a probe was already on against the then chief minister, Mayawati, under whom Mishra was the minister for public works while Tandon looked after housing and urban development. Incidentally, they still continue to hold the same portfolios.

Even as both Mishra and Tandon had been contenders for the chief ministership, they have chosen to support Raj Nath since their own cases turned very weak. And in case the central leadership concedes their demand for shifting Kalyan Singh to the Centre, Raj Nath has a bright chance of taking his place in Lucknow. And surely, they would be able to strike a deal with him.

However, the wary top brass of the BJP is reported to have summoned Raj Nath Singh to New Delhi to ensure that the curtain is drawn over the controversy. After all, the party is still struggling to keep the flock of its demanding allies together both in New Delhi and in Lucknow. •

Sharat Pradhan/Lucknow

The civil servant

Cabinet secretary Prabhat Kumar abhors being called the BJP's man in the bureaucracy

In December last year, the then Cabinet secretary, T.S.R. Subramaniam, was given an extension until 31 March. The I.K. Gujral government decided that at a time when the nation was going to the polls, it would not be fair to appoint a new Cabinet secretary. That prerogative should rightfully go to the new government. But, it did leave itself a loophole. In January another bureaucrat was given a year's extension.

That man was Mata Prasada, water resources secretary and an old friend of the former Congress president, Sitaram Kesri. The implication of that extension was lost to no one. At that time it seemed probable that another UF-Congress coalition would form the next government. And that of course, Prasada would get to be the next Cabinet secretary.

Even when Kesri's stars — and with it Prasada's — began to decline, the betting veered towards another member of the 1962 batch, Yogesh Chandra, the high-profile chairman of the Indian Trade Promotion Organisation.

But what would happen in the event of a BJP-led coalition?

That's when bureaucrats mentioned Prabhat Kumar, the then textiles secretary and more importantly, the senior-most in the 1963 batch. But is he close to the BJP, asked one who knew how such appointments are made.

No one was quite sure. Kumar was not perceived to be close to either the Congress or the UF, so by default, it was decided that he must be close to the BJP.

That sentiment gained legitimacy when the ruling party did indeed announce on 23 March that its next Cabinet secretary would be the low-profile officer from the Uttar Pradesh cadre.

Prabhat Kumar was not in India when the announcement was made. He was away in Dhaka attending a meeting of the International Jute Council. The irony of the venue was not lost on Kumar. A couple of months ago he had been offered the chairmanship of the council. That would have ensured a five-year job security — not to mention the other perks.

On the other hand, his tenure in the Indian Administrative Service will expire in October. He may or may not be given an extension. And at the time, his promotion as Cabinet secretary was equally debatable.

That was when Kumar took a calculated risk.

He turned down the job in Dhaka and set his eyes and prayers firmly on the one in Delhi. So, it was only fitting that he was attending a meeting of the IJC when he was told that his gamble had paid off.

There are those who argue that the BJP was not playing favourites when it appointed Kumar. It merely went by the rule book and chose the one next in line for the job. By that calculation, Prasada was disqualified because he was already on an extension and Chandra would be retiring in June.

Others sneer and claim that they had been right all along. The 58-year-old Kumar was indeed the BJP's man in the bureaucracy. Hadn't he also served as principal secretary (home) to the Kalyan Singh government in Uttar Pradesh for a year?

As for the man himself, this is the kind of speculation he abhors. Even at the time when possible names were doing the rounds, he refused to be drawn into speculation.

"Instead of wasting time speculating on names, let's talk about what needs to be done," he had told SUNDAY then. And went on to talk of the need to reduce red tape and make the bureaucracy more accessible to the people. At this point, he had praised Subramaniam for his efforts in this direction.

According to him, accountability and transparency are the need of the hour. And these seem to be good enough pointers of how he plans to run his new office. When common sense fails, he has his double masters to back him: Kumar holds a masters in physics and mathematics from the alma mater of most civil servants, the Allahabad University. In addition, Kumar is also one of the few who made it to the London School of Economics.

As for those used to mugshots and interviews of the Cabinet secretary splashed all over the papers will have noticed a lack of these in the last month. Save for the pictures of him being ushered into his new chair by the outgoing Cabinet secretary, the raven-haired Kumar has kept a safe distance from the press.

The new Cabinet secretary is as low-profile as the former textiles secretary. Even his bio-data ends with his taking over as the officer on special duty to the Cabinet secretariat, Government of India, from 23 to 31 March. What followed afterwards is something Kumar is not prepared to talk about — just yet. That is perhaps because he is aware of the enormity of the task at hand.

It was Subramaniam who had lamented that politicians only need bureaucrats who are prepared to bend to their whims and fancies...The demand becomes even more difficult in the current era of coalition governments. For Prabhat Kumar to keep his job, he will have to placate not only the BJP but even others such as Jayalalitha, Mamata Banerjee and Ramakrishna Hegde.

In short, not only does he have to do his job, but he also has to make sure that he gets to keep it. •

V RAMAKRISHNA

Bad weather, pests and farmers' agitation force opium output to an all-time low

Where have al

Opium is the mainstay of farmers in Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh. The crop not only provides them with a livelihood but also gives them an ego-boost. The Mandsaur farmers are proud of the opium they grow. But this year, their crop has gone to ruin and the farmers are sick and shaken.

It was not just bad weather produced by unpredictable air currents that acted as spoilsport, but other elements such as the working of the narcotics bureau and an agitation by the Kisan Kamgar Party (KKP) of the maverick peasant leader Mahendra Singh Tikait have also contributed to this year's disastrous crop failure.

PRAKASH HATVALNE

An opium collection centre: checking consistency

Their combined mischief has left over 27,000 farmers so badly hit that many have become psychological wrecks. It would be a matter of no great surprise therefore, if, like the cotton farmers of Andhra Pradesh, a few poppy growers of Madhya Pradesh were to commit suicide.

And it's not just the farmers of Mandsaur who are going to suffer for the failed poppy. Shock waves of the calamity are going to be felt internationally. Opium, the main ingredient going into the making of many life-saving drugs, is exported by India to the USA, UK, France, and Japan. Mandsaur produces about 70 per cent of the country's total opium and accounts for the premium quality. This year, however, India will find it difficult to fulfil its export commitments. The shortfall is also sure to influence the smuggling of heroin and smack.

The opium crop is a status symbol for the farmers of Mandsaur. Even marriages are negotiated on the basis of the area cultivated by individual families. So strong are the social considerations that women readily pledge their ornaments for the sake of raising a healthy crop. This year, the farmers say, more than 70 per cent of the crops have been damaged.

Opium cultivation in Mandsaur is monitored by the narcotics department. The season begins in November and lasts till mid-March, when opium latex is collected after making incisions in the opium bulb. Last year, the weather was foul when sowing started in November. It had been raining more than usual, and when it didn't, the sky was invariably murky.

Compounding the problem was an agitation by farmers demanding a higher opium procurement price from the narcotics department, which picks up the entire licensed produce. The farmers wanted Rs 2,000 per kg instead of the present Rs 475 to Rs 1,000 per kg depending on the per hectare yield. The higher price would have given the growers greater income. KKP supremo Mahendra Singh Tikait himself came to Neemuch, the *tehsil* town of Mandsaur, where he addressed several rallies.

He appealed to the farmers to boycott opium cultivation till the procurement price was raised. His appeal did have the desired affect. The farmers did not sow.

To get round the boycott, the narcotics department tried to outmanoeuvre the agitators. "We gave 27,000 more licences to new farmers for opium cultivation," says the state's assistant narcotics commissioner (ANC), Rajesh Nagpal. "These licences were also given on

the flowers gone?

PRAKASH HATVALNE

PRAKASH HATVALNE

Waiting at the collection centre: boom to bust

time," he claims.

But Nanalal Patidar, one of the biggest opium growers and BJP MLA from Sitamau in Mandsaur, alleges that the "the narcotics department made an inordinate delay in giving new licences".

Farmers who were issued new licences went ahead and sowed poppy seeds ignoring Tikait's appeal. But by that time the damage had already been done. Several fungus-related diseases struck because of the damp weather. "Downy mildew, a fungus that appears soon after sowing, struck along with the powdery mildew," says C.P.S. Yadav, dean of KNK Agriculture College in Mandsaur. Adds G.N. Pandey, a plant pathologist in the college, "Downy mildew and stem rot did the maximum damage."

But the farmers are still not able to understand why the crop failed. They appeared to be in a state of shock as they formed long queues at the opium centre in Mandsaur to deposit whatever little produce they could salvage.

Modiram Champalal Pandey is a 60-year-old farmer for whom opium cultivation has been a traditional family occupation. Pandey is taken aback by the loss this season. "This is unprecedented. This is for the first time in my life that I saw such widespread damage," he says.

Prabhulal Chaudhry, 55, says that he got a niggardly yield of only 2.9 kg opium from 18 are area (1 hectare has around 97 are). "It is mandatory for a farmer to produce 52 kg per hectare," he explains, and says that anyone who fails to deposit the minimum qualifying yield (MQY) decided by the authorities each year loses the licence to grow opium the next year. Chaudhry may not get the chance to sow in the coming season.

For the farmers of Mandsaur, the opium crop is a status symbol. Even marriages are negotiated on the basis of the area cultivated by families. This year, however, more than 70 per cent of the crops have been damaged

Prabhulal is less enthusiastic about what might happen next year. His immediate concern is that he be allowed to extract opium only to collect opium seeds (*posta dana*), which is sold at about Rs 11,000 per quintal. "This will help me to recover at least the money I spent on fertilizers and manures."

"Do you know about the cotton farmers of Andhra Pradesh?" asked Modiram and other farmers. "They committed suicide. We are facing the same situation here in Mandsaur." As a result of the bad crop, a large number of farmers have applied for *hanka* — the permission to uproot the wilted poppy trees and deposit them at the office of deputy commissioner of narcotics in Neemuch. This, they feel, will prove that cultivation had actually been done and help them secure new licences for the next season. The ANC says that about 20,000 applications have been received for *hanka*.

Sources in the narcotics department say that, this year, more opium has gone into the black market — in the hands of smugglers. "In the name of a bad crop, the small farmers want to go in for *hanka*, while a few big farmers have deposited some opium to the department. But the remaining have been sold to smugglers," sources say.

Last year, about 550 metric tonne of opium was deposited with the Alkaloid factory in Neemuch. This year, the collection is expected to be only around 40 per cent of last year's record production.

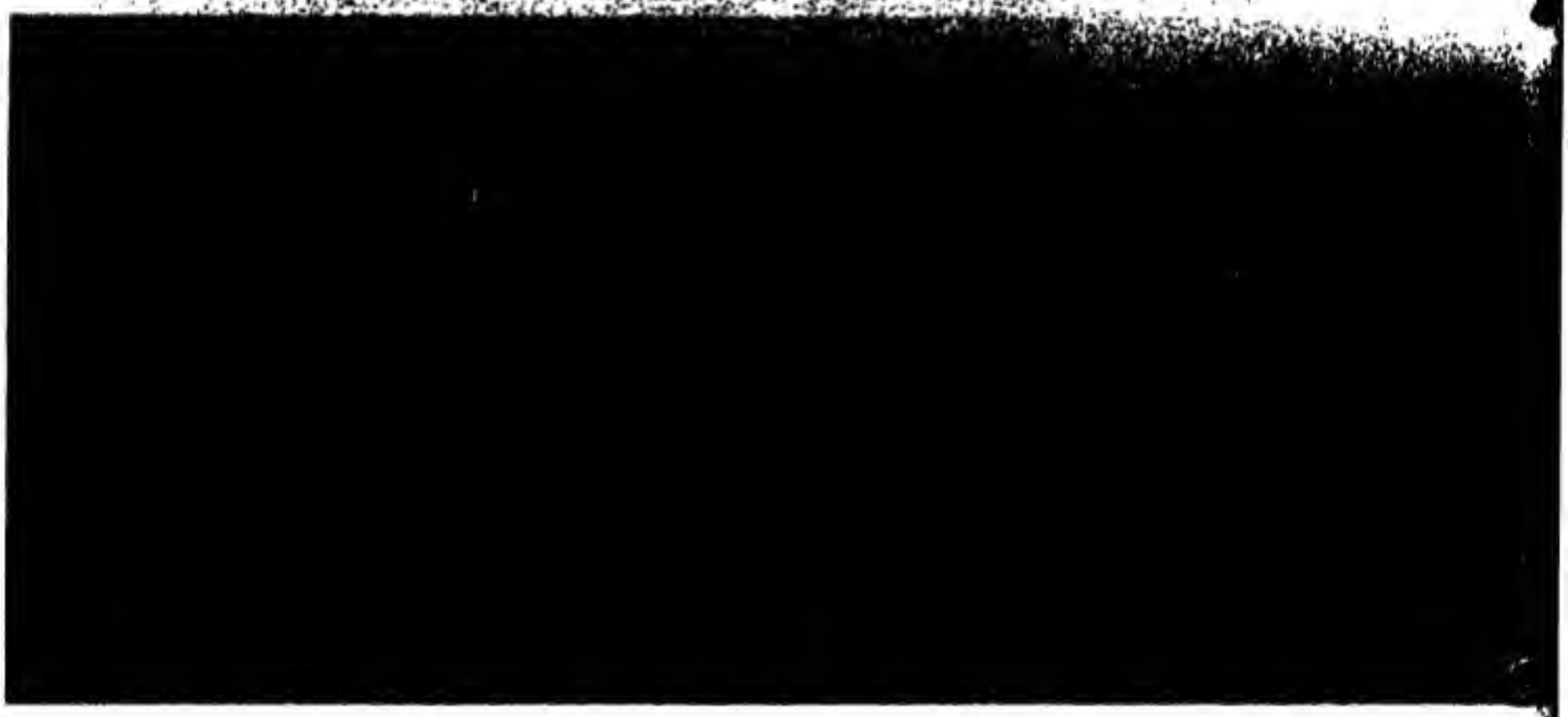
Smuggling of opium and its dreaded derivatives such as brown sugar and heroin are still a major problem in Mandsaur. "Last year we caught 1,100 kg of opium, a record, and seized 13 small and big laboratories in rural areas," says the ANC. He says that the farmers began clamouring for a higher procurement price because the diversion of opium into the narcotics market had been effectively sealed.

While that may be partially true, there is no denying that this year's crop has been largely ruined, leaving many farmers struggling for survival. •

Deshdeep Saxena/Mandsaur

SHRIRAM BRIDGES

Bridging the demand-supply gap in credit facilities to truck owners, through India's first Truck Exchange Scheme.



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THE GAP

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Asian FAT CATS

They are rich. They are powerful. And they are the people who have made Britain proud

It was the annual "rattle your jewellery, pat yourself on the back" event for Britain's Asians. The publication of "The Richest Asian 200" by *The Eastern Eye* and *The Sunday Times* has become an event for Asians to do what they like best, counting their money.

Last year, when the first list was published, it was very much a pre-election Conservative affair with Michael Heseltine, former president of the department of trade and industry and a successful businessman himself, launching the report with much talk of how hard-working Asians had benefited from Conservative rule. This year, it was no less

V. RAMOON

A.P. Hinduja (right) and S.P. Hinduja: the second richest and worth 1.2 billion pounds

than Prime Minister Tony Blair jumping on the bandwagon.

With wife Cherie — looking elegant in a cream oyster silk sari with sequins on the border — the Blairs were the toast of the evening. Never mind that the whole roomful of men and women in their dinner jackets and glittering evening wear at the Cafe Royale were probably all Conservative voters anyway.

But the Blairs were ready to play to the gallery. With Cherie, dazzling in her 800 pound sari and very much the "toast of the tabloids", Tony Blair complimented his wife in front of the gathering. "I don't know if Cherie's sari will be the toast of the tabloids," said Britain's youngest Prime Minister, "but I must say, I like her in it."

Cherie blushed, the crowds clapped, and the Blairs for that evening had the crowds thrilled. Here was the British Prime Minister lavishing his highest praise on the community and they were pleased about it.

Cherie Blair was no doubt the star of the evening. This was her second time in a sari and she had taken a lot of pains to get it right this time. The Prime Minister's wife had worn a sari on an earlier occasion last year to mark the 50th anniversary of Indian Independence. But on that occasion, her bright red and green sari had been criticised as garish and a bit dated. This time, she wanted to take no chances and so consulted the fashion shop, Chiffon, from where the shop's owner took a range of item to 10 Downing Street for Mrs Blair to choose from. These included a *lehnga*, some *salwaar kameezes* and saris. Mrs Blair chose the sari as it suited the formality of the occasion.

With help from the owner's wife, who helped Cherie don her sari, the first lady of Britain stepped out before the gallery of photographers and television cameras perfectly draped, radiant and sure of herself.

But knowing that most of the people in the hall would have voted Conservative in the last election, Tony Blair said: "I don't care who you voted for at the last election. I believe that everyone tonight will be starting to see the benefit that a new and energetic government can make to our great country."

Tony Blair, who had said he was there to "celebrate the achievements of the community", went on to praise the spirit of Asian enterprise. "When I look around me tonight, I can see many of the success stories that are making this country such an enterprising nation. Your businesses typify the energy, innovation and outward-looking qualities that I want to see in the Britain of the 21st century."

Sitting in the audience was Lord Paul, the third richest Asian on the list with estimated wealth of 500 million pounds. Top of the list was steel magnate L.N. Mittal with two billion pounds. In second place were the Hindujas with 1.2 billion pounds. Neither L.N. Mittal nor the Hindujas were present at the function.

A newcomer on the list and in fourth position was Subhash Chandra of Zee TV with a 450-million-pound empire. At number ten was Vijay Mallya, of Untied Breweries, with a fortune of 100

VINCENT DOLMAN

Tony Blair addressing the function: happy with the Asians; (inset) Cherie Blair (left) wearing a sari

Britain's 200 richest Asians are collectively valued at 7.5 billion pounds and the bulk of them are East African Gujaratis. The list include those who have made a killing from food, fashion and electronics businesses, besides those who have benefited from engineering industries

million pounds. The top 200 are collectively valued at 7.5 billion pounds and the main bulk of them were East African Gujaratis.

The list includes those who had a made a killing in the food business like G.K. Noon, of Noon Products Plc, (35th and valued at 25 million pounds) who supplies chilled and frozen foods to supermarkets like Sainsburys and Waitrose, Perween Warsi of S&A Foods who is placed 20th on the list with a fortune of 45 million pound, and Kirit and Meena Pathak of the legendary Pataks pickles and pastes, who are placed 30th on the list with estimated wealth of 30 million pounds.

Those who had made their fortune in the fashion business included Tom Singh (150 million) who runs the New Look chain of retail stores stocking women's fashions, and is placed 6th on the list. At 15th, with a fortune of 60 pound million, was Shami Ahmed, founder of the legendary Joe Bloggs jeans, and Rajan Kumar, head of the Rajan group, a Manchester-based fashion business. Kumar is valued at 50 million pound.

Old stalwarts like Madhubhai Madhvani remained within the top ten with fortunes estimated at 150 million pounds, while Gulu Lalvani and his electronics business made him worth 60 million pounds and 15th on the list.

Though the list was released with much fanfare, there was some criticism of it as not being accurate. The inclusion of people like Subhash Chandra of Zee TV, who are based in India, was regarded as unfair. The logic, says Philip Beresford, editor of the Sunday Times Rich List and compiler of the Asian list, is that Zee has a successful British and European arm and Subhash Chandra has declared himself an NRI.

There were also mumblings about how the list of millionaires shot up from 100 last year to a clear two hundred this year. Tony Blair joked that his government was clearly working but other observers were cynical. "Most Asians have family-run businesses which are not listed on the stock market. It is very difficult listing their wealth," said a dinner guest.

And as for the "which-side-are-you-on" question, some former Tory candidates were cynical. "Last year, all these people said they were on our side, yet we don't really know which they voted. If you ask them, they'll probably lie," said a former Tory MP.

Last year, the 1.5-million strong Asian community had fancied themselves as being crucial in the marginal constituencies, if the election contest had been a close one. But the great Labour swing had proved that they did not really matter and the Labour Party did not have to pander to them to remain in power. Even so, the Prime Minister was here to praise them.

Having been wooed by Conservatives for so many years, the Asian fat cats were now being wooed by the New Labour Party. "After all, there may be some converts now," said a Labour-supporting millionaire. "There's no harm in trying." •

Shrabani Basu/London

THE LORD PAUL

Tony Blair considers him to be the hardest working peer in the House of Lords

In Britain he's The Lord Paul, described by Tony Blair at a recent function as the "hardest working peer in the House of Lords". He's also been hand-picked by the Prime Minister as a member of the select Panel 2000— part of a team that will be responsible for launching the Prime Minister's dream image of Cool Britannia — as opposed to the traditional idea of Britain being a country of castles, Queens and colonial hangovers. The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh recently invited him along with eleven other select guests to a lunch at Buckingham Palace where he was seated on the right of the Queen, a special honour. He's the man who gave 1 million pound to the London Zoo and saved it for British kids when it was facing closure. He's one of the top 100 richest men in Britain with an estimated fortune of 500 million pound.

But in India, he's a Nowhere Man, with a long history of trying to set up factories and plants that didn't take off. He's written all about it in his recently published autobiography Beyond Boundaries. *The book has already sparked off a controversy in India as it blames the Rajiv Gandhi government for pressurising him to accept a deal with the Italian firm Snam Progetti to set up a fertiliser plant. When Paul did not agree — because Snam's equipment was not up to the standard and because it was overpriced — the deal fell through. With accusations and counter-accusations, the controversy is blowing up at a time when Sonia Gandhi is just settling down as Congress party president.*

SUNDAY *caught up with Swraj Paul at his offices in Caparo House in Baker Street, where Lord Paul was busy at work (he says he's been even busier after retirement). Sitting with him were two of his grandchildren, who Paul was baby-sitting on their Easter holidays. It was very much a family at work, part of the family values that Paul always likes to stress.*

On a day when freak snow showers hit London in spring, Lord Paul talked about his relationship with Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi and why he had never succeeded in India. Excerpts from the interview:

"I didn't enjoy the same relationship with Rajiv that I had with Mrs Gandhi. He wasn't anything like his mother"

SUNDAY: There have been strong denials about you being pressurised to deal with Snam Progetti. What is the real story behind the failed fertiliser project?

Swraj Paul: I have said what I have to say. I think it's been blown out of proportions. I don't know whowas telling the truth — Mr Prabhu or Rajiv Gandhi. All I knew is that at the end of it they cancelled the deal.

Prabhu (former minister of state for fertilisers) is reported to have said that my record of events surrounding the cancellation of the licence issued to me in 1985 for construction of the plant in Shahjahanpur is "false and misleading". Mr Prabhu's reported statement suggests that he has either not read my book, nor understood it or has some reason to confuse the facts.

There are only two pages in my book about the deal. These have been clearly blown out of proportion. Mr Prabhu said I am maligning his "beloved former Prime Minister" Rajiv Gandhi. But I have clearly said that Rajiv Gandhi said I should "buy the best and the cheapest machinery and ignore everything else". I also write that he repeated this several times to me. It was Quattrocchi of Snam Progetti and Mr Prabhu who urged me to buy Snam Progetti equipment. Prabhu said: "The boss wants it."

Well, I went to Rajiv Gandhi several times and told him what was going on. He told me clearly to buy the cheapest and the best. Different signals reached me from elsewhere. I was getting nowhere with the ministry. Personal meetings with Rajiv were fruitless. The deal fell through. I don't know who was telling the truth.

I am not maligning the former Prime Minister as Mr Prabhu suggests. However, it does show that Mr Prabhu used the then Prime Minister's name freely. In short, it appears to me that Mr Prabhu is trying to evade the issue by raising a smokescreen about the late Prime Minister. It is Mr Prabhu who is maligning the late Rajiv Gandhi by using his name in the matter.

Q: But surely when you say you were getting different signals from the government and you don't know who was telling the truth, you are blaming the former

Prime Minister?
A: No, I'm not. Like I said, I don't know who was telling the truth. All I know is that the deal was dropped and I heard nothing more. Snam Progetti's equipment wasn't the cheapest, it wasn't the best. Quattrocchi is a businessman — he had to sell his equipment. But it was Mr Prabhu who told me "the boss wants it". I said let me go and find out from him. Rajiv Gandhi told me to buy the cheapest and best as many as three or four times. What could I say. Mr Prabhu was not clearing the machinery import. We were chasing his ministry for allowing us to purchase the equipment. But he just wanted us to buy Snam Progetti's equipment. Later, Mr Prabhu got off the bandwagon.

Again, Mr Prabhu says he met my late brother and me "several times". But he met me only once though he may have met my brother Surrendra on some occasions. It was when he met me that he pressed me to buy Snam Progetti's equipment. He was even more anxious that I report to Rajiv Gandhi that he (Prabhu) was doing a good job as minister. This seemed to be an obsessive concern of his, and he clearly wanted me to tell Rajiv that he was a "loyal" minister, a concern justified by his later removal from the fertiliser ministry.

Mr Prabhu also said that I had not even acquired the land for the project. This makes no sense. One does not buy the land before you know the process to use. Both go simultaneously.

As for the statement by Mr Vincent George---the personal secretary to Rajiv Gandhi — that he did not contact me and only provided "secretarial services" to Rajiv Gandhi, we all know that secretarial services include contacting people on behalf of the boss. So his explanation cannot be serious.

As to the cancellation of the licence in 1988, I stick to what I write in the book.

(*Paul writes that in 1988 when the licence was up for renewal he found that the three other fertiliser manufacturers who had all purchased Snam equipment, had their permits renewed. Without prior notification his was cancelled and promptly given elsewhere.*)

In India, fertiliser plants are put up on a cost plus basis, which is wrong. I might have withdrawn myself, I don't know what may have happened.

Q: Would you have agreed to Snam Progetti if the Prime Minister had requested you personally?
A: I don't know. I suppose that would be different. But I don't think I would have given in easily. Snam Progetti's tender was about $ 35 million more than the others and the equipment was not as good either. I don't know what would have happened but I think I would have argued.

Q: Is this when the break with the Gandhi family started?
A: No, no. The break had started long before that. It wasn't actually a 'break'. It's just that I didn't enjoy the same relationship with Rajiv that I had with Mrs Gandhi. The relation just wasn't the same. He wasn't anything like his mother.

I consider Sonia Gandhi a better person than Rajiv Gandhi.

Q: Then why the timing of this, just when she has taken over as Congress president?

Rajiv Gandhi with Sonia during an election campaign

A: As far as I am concerned, the book was written two years ago. It was mostly completed in 1996. But then I got my peerage and so I decided to include the perspective of a peer. I held up the book or it would have gone long back. Besides, this book is about me and my life. The reference to the fertiliser deal is only two pages of my book.

It has nothing to do with my relation with Sonia. My affection for Sonia is exactly the same, two years ago, 20 years ago and 10 years ago. I think she's a very nice person. I may have disagreed with her husband, but that does not change my opinion of her. I think she's better than her husband.

Q: But the Snam Progetti — Quattrocchi connection implicates her surely?
A: I think that is unfortunate. It is just because she is Italian. The real connection is between Rajiv Gandhi and Quattrocchi. Sonia has no role in it.

Q: Recently, you spoke out in favour of the BJP. You compared it to new New Labour, a reformed party. Are you blaming the Gandhis and speaking in favour of the BJP?
A: No, that's not true. All I said in that interview was that the BJP should not be judged on the same lines as it has been for the past 20 years. I did not compare it with New Labour. I just said that during the election campaign, the Congress were saying the things about the BJP just like the

"I met Rajiv Gandhi several times. He told me clearly to buy the cheapest and the best machinery. But the personal meetings with Rajiv were fruitless. The deal fell through"

Conservative Party in this country were saying about the Labour Party. They were talking about Old Labour, that party does not exist today.

So all I was saying was that we should not judge the BJP by what it was 15-20 years ago. I think genuinely that they have changed. They have good leadership and it is a much better party than before. This couldn't have been without a change.

Q: But don't you think they have merely put certain points of their agenda on the backburner, but could just go ahead with it if they had a majority?
A: If they did bring up their communal agenda, I would be the first to condemn them. But when we are speaking about the BJP as a political party today, we cannot see them as being anything but secular. Today, they are as secular as any other party that goes into negative discrimination. But if the BJP change, I will be the first one to criticise them.

Q: You are perhaps the only NRI industrialist in London who has never entertained the BJP when they have visited. You have entertained people on the Left Front, Jyoti Basu is a regular guest, and you have held dinners for others. How do you reconcile your backing for Jyoti Basu with your comments on the BJP?
A: I only entertain friends. Jyoti Basu is a friend. I don't know people in the BJP, they are not my friends, I have no contact with them and I have never entertained them.

I have just spoken what I think from an outsider's point of view. I am out of Indian politics. I have been since 1984. I am not interested in it anymore. I have enough politics here.

Q: Your comments can be seen as trying to stay on the right side of the government...
A: That is not my style. In that case, I should have been in the Conservative Party. I have very strong principles and I stick to that. I believed in the Labour Party and I supported the party through years of political wilderness. I did not change my stand.

Q: To get back to the book, your whole record in India has been one of failed plants and failed take-over bids. How do you feel about it?
A: *(Smiles.)* And I have dealt with each one of these failed bids. What can I say, I failed to do it in India. But I have learnt a lot.

But I must say, each of the projects that I missed eventually spent more money than what I had originally suggested. When I would give my estimate it was always considered too much. But eventually they all spent even more than I had suggested.

That is the way of working in India. They first suggest one cheap estimate, then later they want to upgrade the

"I consider Sonia a better person than Rajiv"

plant. The upgradation does or does not work, but eventually more money is spent. And that has happened in each of my failed projects. Not one plant has been put up at the original cost estimate.

Q: Is there a tinge of remorse that Caparo has bought plants in USA, Europe, and UK, but only has the small Maruti components plant in Gurgaon in India?
A: No remorse. What can you do? In life sometimes you get it, and sometimes you don't. God has been kind to me. What more do I need.

You know, I could not save something that I fought very hard to save (referring to his daughter, Ambika, who died of childhood leukaemia), so what does anything else matter? I have no regrets. I am content with what I have.

Q: Do you think the BJP will provide a stable government?
A: The last few elections have told me that India is stable, Indian political parties may not be. And that is what is important to me. •

Interviewed by Shrabani Basu/London

OUR AMERICAN

Bill Richardson's visit kindles hopes of improved Indo-US ties

It was truly a meeting of minds. In fact, even before Bill Richardson, the US ambassador to the UN and president Bill Clinton's personal envoy, actually met home minister L.K. Advani in New Delhi recently, the stage had been set for making the meeting a long-term investment in Indo-US relations.

If the Clinton administration was serious about establishing a modus vivendi with the BJP-led government in New Delhi quite early in its tenure, it could not have found anyone better suited than Richardson for the delicate task of making the initial, exploratory contacts with the new group of men and women who wield power in India. As a result, Richardson's reputation had travelled to the home minister ahead of the envoy.

Richardson is no stranger to this country. He had been to India about a decade-and-a-half ago and again in 1996. But it was the second trip which had established his credibility in the eyes of people like Advani.

On that visit, Richardson, then a member of the US House of Representatives from New Mexico's Third District, had gone to Jammu and Kashmir to try and secure the release of an American, who had been kidnapped along with four other Westerners by the notorious Al Faran, a phantom front organisation created by Pakistani intelligence for terrorist operations in the troubled north-Indian border state.

There, at his meetings with the militants, as it became increasingly clear that his mission was doomed to failure, Richardson lashed out at the perpetrators of terror in Kashmir, questioning both their motives and their methods.

Richardson minced no words in his condemnation of those who were sustaining the cycle of violence in Jammu and Kashmir. It was unlike anything that the militants had heard from the Americans in a long time. After all, US officials in Washington, then dealing with South Asia, used to praise the very same separatists as freedom fighters even as they condemned terrorism in principle!

The reaction to Richardson's outburst was predictable. The next day he was to leave New Delhi for Islamabad, where meetings had been fixed, among others, with the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

But even before he arrived in Islamabad, word had travelled from the militants to the Pakistan Prime Minister's Office about the dressing down they had received from the visiting US Congressman. Promptly, the Pakistani Prime Minister cancelled the appointment with Richardson.

So, even before the US president's high-profile envoy walked into North Block for his first meeting with the home minister and the outgoing BJP president, his credibility as a no-nonsense politician with Advani had been established.

As the two men sat down following the preliminaries, the US envoy mentioned Advani's address to his party's national executive the previous day where he had spoken of a "new BJP".

It was just the opening that Advani was waiting for. He gave Richardson a comprehensive account of the BJP's growth from a party with just two members in the Lok Sabha in 1984 to what it has become today.

PTI PHOTO

GLOBAL CONCERNS: Advani with Richardson (right) and Inderfurth

By the time their meeting was over, Advani and Richardson had clearly established a personal equation, comparable perhaps to the one between Indira Gandhi and Ronald Reagan

Yes, the BJP had grown entirely on the basis of its ideology between 1984 and 1996, Advani told Richardson. Then the party had hit a trough and its subsequent growth had been based on the promise of governance.

It was an assessment which Richardson could very well comprehend. After all, the Americans had tried in vain so far in Clinton's second term to lift Indo-US ties out of the stagnation into which it had slipped ever since the last Congress government in New Delhi had been replaced by a United Front government.

By the time Advani had finished explaining the BJP's growth and outlining his vision for the future, the visiting envoy had been bowled over. He conceded that what he had heard from the "horse's mouth" as it were was very different from the distorted image of the party which the US media has

FRIEND

been spreading during and after the recent Lok Sabha election.

"This is a voice which ought to be heard from the National Press Club in DC," Richardson told Advani. The two men then discussed in detail the issues they are most concerned with: the scourge of terrorism, national security and, of course, the broad range of Indo-US relations.

By the time the meeting was over, Advani and Richardson had clearly established a personal equation.

Never before, and never since Indira Gandhi and Ronald Reagan established a personal rapport at the Cancun summit in Mexico in 1981, has there been such a meeting of minds between two leaders from India and the US. And in this newly-created equation perhaps lies the best augury of a better relationship between Washington and New Delhi in the 21st century as they both prepare to work together "as countries with global responsibilities", the way Richardson put it.

In the Indian government, officials who have been burning the midnight oil preparing for Richardson's visit ever since the telephone conversation between Clinton and Vajpayee last month — when the latest round of Indo-US talks were scheduled — are "optimistic, but also realistic".

Their optimism stems from the realisation that the Advani-Richardson meeting was not an exception but the rule during the visit of the US team, which included the State Department's point person for South Asia, Karl Inderfurth, the director for South Asia in the National Security Council, Bruce Riedel, and deputy assistant secretary of state in charge of non-proliferation, Robert Einhorn.

At the meeting with Vajpayee, for instance, Richardson opened the substantive part of the discussion by referring to India's "global responsibilities". For those on Raisina Hill who have been dealing with the Americans for several years, this was a refreshing change in Washington. Since the end of the Cold War, successive US administrations never tired of stressing parity and equidistance between New Delhi and Islamabad.

As a result, the Americans frittered away the considerable enthusiasm in this country for a new relationship with Washington soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union by concentrating on Kashmir, Indo-Pak relations and arms proliferation. It has taken nearly a decade for the US to realise that there is precious little that they can do in enhancing their goals in these areas in South Asia.

Richardson's Indian interlocutors are, however, under no illusion that Washington's agenda on either Kashmir or on non-proliferation has changed appreciably. But they recognise that the agenda itself has expanded. Said one official who sat in on some of Richardson's meetings in New Delhi: "The hectoring and pushing which he had to put up with earlier was not there this time. The obsession with issues which were part of the old agenda was missing for a change."

Officials have, however, warned the Vajpayee government against any complacency in dealing with Washington as a result of the goodwill generated by the Richardson mission to India. "The contentious issues are still very much on the table," pointed out one official. "Only they may become less conspicuous because there are other issues such as energy or environment on which progress is possible."

Testifying to the expanded agenda is the decision by foreign secretary K. Raghunath to fly to Washington within a few days of Richardson's visit. Normally, the foreign secretary would not have gone so soon after such a high-profile bilateral exchange.

Officials also stressed that Thomas Pickering, Raghunath's counterpart in the State Department in Washington, will make a return visit within three months. The frequency of such exchanges at the official level, a departure from the past, suggests that both sides want to seize the opportunity for progress in the bilateral relationship.

India has also noticed that the welcome departure from the American practice of equating India and Pakistan has been coupled by a conscious decision in Washington to increase the profile of Bangladesh in South Asia. As a result, Richardson began his South Asian sojourn in Dhaka, from where he travelled to New Delhi.

For India, this is a welcome development. If nothing else, it will make those who decide policy in Washington realise that there is more to the subcontinent than terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir or missile and nuclear proliferation. •

K.P. Nayar/New Delhi

WINDS OF CHANGE

Pointers to a new relationship

- Richardson's reference to India's global responsibilities. A refreshing change since the end of the Cold War when successive US administrations never tired of stressing parity and equidistance between New Delhi and Islamabad.

- Foreign secretary K. Raghunath's decision to fly to Washington within a few days of Richardson's visit which will be reciprocated by his US counterpart Thomas Pickering. It suggests that both sides are keen on enduring bilateral ties.

Prisoners of the Al Faran

PTI PHOTO

- Richardson's tough-talking, no-nonsense stance during the Al Faran hostage crisis. It was unlike anything that the militants had heard from the Americans in a long time.

- Richardson's admission that what he had heard from Advani (from the 'horse's mouth' as he put it) was very different from the distorted image of the party which the US media has been spreading. 'This is a voice which ought to be heard from the National Press Club in DC,' he said.

Muddy waters

Summer resurrects the Cauvery water dispute. But real issues are forgotten

As the summer pushes the mercury up in the southern states, leaders of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu get ready to embark on their seemingly endless dispute over the sharing of the Cauvery waters. This year, the first salvos have been fired. Sensing trouble over the issue, chief ministers of both the states made their appeals to the central government last week.

But the tragic part of such forethoughts is that these appeals have more to do with the political one-upmanship among the feuding leaders and less with the hardships that millions face.

Arbitrating this round of the dispute will be a beleagured Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. Although he feels that "the Cauvery dispute will be resolved amicably and the interests of both the states will be protected", the PM — like many of his predecessors — is likely to encounter difficulties in finding a solution.

When H.D. Deve Gowda — Karnataka's self-proclaimed 'son-of-the-soil' — became Prime Minister, many hoped he would extricate the state from following the Cauvery Water Tribunal's interim award, according to which, Karnataka has to raise the amount of water released to Tamil Nadu every year. But Gowda — whose support base was the Cauvery-fed areas of the old Mysore region — could do nothing beacuse one of his major coalition partners was Tamil Nadu's DMK.

Down by the river: the Cauvery sustains life in large parts

Quiet flows the Cauvery

As Karnataka and Tamil Nadu fight over sharing its waters

The Cauvery water dispute between the upper and the lower reparian areas of the river is more than a century old. The first attempt to settle the dispute was made in 1892 when an agreement was signed between the Madras Presidency and the Mysore state, under which Mysore could not undertake any irrigation project without prior permission of Madras.

[illegible] agreed that water should be administrator H.D. Griffin drew up a new formula for sharing the river waters in 1924 which was more favourable to it. Madras appealed against the formula and had a fresh one drawn up in 1924 in its own favour. Based on the 1892 agreement, this formula was valid for 50 years.

In 1972, the central government set up a Cauvery Fact Finding Committee in order to settle the dispute. But when the report was submitted, both the state governments refused to sign it and instead submitted various draft proposals and formulas over the next decade. Innumerable petitions to the Centre by both the governments and by a number of farmers to the Supreme Court followed.

The Supreme Court, in 1990, asked the two states to settle the issue through talks and, two years later, set a deadline of two months. Talks at various levels followed and in the absence of a settlement, the Supreme Court directed the Centre to set up a tribunal to resolve the issue. The tribunal issued an interim order in 1991, telling Karnataka that it should

Prime Minister Vajpayee with Karunanidhi: balancing act

Vajpayee is in no better position. He cannot keep both Karunanidhi and the AIADMK supremo Jayalalitha — who holds the key to central government's stability — in good humour at the same time. Even if Vajpayee

release 205 TMC foot of water to Tamil Nadu every year according to a monthly schedule it had prescribed. Karnataka, which claimed that the figure was too high, especially in years of bad monsoons, issued an ordinance refusing to abide by the tribunal's order. Anti-Tamil riots broke out across the state which claimed many lives. The Tamil Nadu government retaliated, with its chief minister [illegible] a fast which lasted four days.

With an election in sight, fresh [illegible] in Karnataka in 1995 [illegible] H.D. [illegible] 205 TMC foot [illegible]

T.RAMAMOORTHY

Jayalalitha breaking fast over the issue: emotive appeal

achieves this impossible task, he can hardly afford to neglect the electorate of Karnataka who voted 16 members of the BJP and its ally Lok Shakti to the Parliament.

In Tamil Nadu, the face-off between Karunanidhi and Jayalalitha is more muddy than the waters of Cauvery. In fact, the sharing of the river's water — which, at best of times, is an economic and social need and, at worst of times, an emotional tinderbox — is merely another weapon in settling political scores. Yet, both have made very similar appeals to the Prime Minister in their "special package" for the state, asking

On the Cauvery issue, Prime Minister Vajpayee cannot keep both Karunanidhi and Jayalalitha in good humour at the same time. Neither can he afford to neglect the electorate of Karnataka who has voted 16 members of the BJP and Lok Shakti to Parliament

for notification of the tribunal's interim award.

Vajpayee managed to evade giving a specific assurance, saying that formulating a National Waters Policy under the National Agenda would be a priority of his government. This was a policy Karnataka — which feels it has got a raw deal from the tribunal — had long been demanding.

Karunanidhi was quick to point out that the BJP had more or less ignored Jayalalitha's demand on the Cauvery dispute which she had made before extending support to the BJP-led government. He also pointed out that the inclusion of water issue in the National Agenda not only reflected the Karnataka government's stand but also voiced the opinion of chief minister J.H. Patel.

On his part, Patel made an appeal that the tribunal's interim award should not be notified. Notifying the award would make it binding on Karnataka to release what it considers too high an amount of water. "Notification of the interim award will only aggravate the problem," warned Patel. "Instead, let the National Water Policy be formulated soon."

It is not that Patel faces no political opposition on the Cauvery issue in his state. Congress leader H.K. Patil recently accused the CM of being "irresponsible" and "sacrificing the interests of the state" by agreeing to an amendment in the Inter-State Waters Dispute Act of 1956. He pointed out that the amendment would make it binding on Karnataka to follow the tribunal's "impractical and unimplementable" interim award.

Worse still, Karnataka apprehends that the final report of the tribunal will be announced soon. "Considering our view that the interim award is unfair to us, we fear that the final report will also go against Karnataka," said Patel. "That is why we are insisting on the National Water Policy and that nothing should be done about the interim award till such a policy is framed," he added.

But Cauvery is also the single unifying force in Karnataka politics. Political parties have sunk their differences whenever the question of releasing water to Tamil Nadu has come up. Decisions regarding the sharing of water have been unanimous.

This is because the river is irrevocably linked with those who depend on it. In Karnataka, it is just as revered as the Ganga is in the north. The river is an integral part of the state's historical, social, political and cultural ethos. Kannada poets have sung paeans to the Cauvery; it has figured in films and even the chief minister's official residence (like millions of girls across the state) is named Cauvery.

In the last two decades, the main issue — of protecting farmers in both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu who depend on the river for survival — has been forgotten. Instead, there is rhetoric, politicking and chauvinism — a steady flow of all these. •

Gauri Lankesh/Bangalore

A lonely man

Pressure mounts on chief minister Digvijay Singh as partymen demand his ouster

The security was unprecedented. All the roads leading to the Madhya Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC) office were blocked and heavily barricaded in Bhopal as the Rajesh Pilot committee (sent by the AICC) began investigating the party's debacle in the Lok Sabha polls in the state. The atmosphere was tense inside the MPCC office as the leaders attacked chief minister Digvijay Singh and blamed him squarely for the Congress' poor performance.

The supporters of Arjun Singh and Madhavrao Scindia openly bayed for Digvijay's blood. They wanted him removed immediately from the CM's post. "We cannot win the Assembly polls in November this year with Digvijay as our leader," said the supporters of Scindia and Arjun Singh. "Digvijay must go," they told Pilot. And, Congressmen want either Scindia or Arjun to lead the Congress in the coming Assembly polls.

For quite sometime now, Arjun Singh is unhappy with Digvijay Singh. Relations between Arjun and Digvijay began to sour when the former left the Congress to join the Congress(T). At that juncture, Digvijay refused to be a party with his mentor. Today, Arjun Singh blames Digvijay for his defeats in the parliamentary polls

No wonder Arjun and Scindia were biding time. And the opportunity

"My survival isn't the issue, but the Congress' survival is"

Says Digvijay Singh

SUNDAY: Why do you think you should continue as chief minister?
Digvijay Singh: I will continue as long as the MLAs and the high command have confidence in me.

Q: Why has an AICC team led by Rajesh Pilot come to Bhopal? It seems Arjun Singh is annoyed with you and Scindia too is not happy.
A: This is unfortunate. I have done my best and if this is not enough let them find a better person. I have no regrets. But this bickering must come to an end. Let's get ready for the next elections.

I have started my preparations. And I have no ego problems; they are senior leaders and I have full respect for them. I am prepared to sort out matters with them. Personally, I have nothing against them.

As far as the AICC exercise is concerned, it's a normal thing. The BJP is also doing it. They do it surreptitiously, while we do it openly (*laughs*).

Q: Many MLAs who met Pilot wanted you to step down. They want either Arjun Singh or Madhavrao Scindia as chief minister.
A: They are a small number. The majority of the MLAs are with me.

ARJUN SINGH

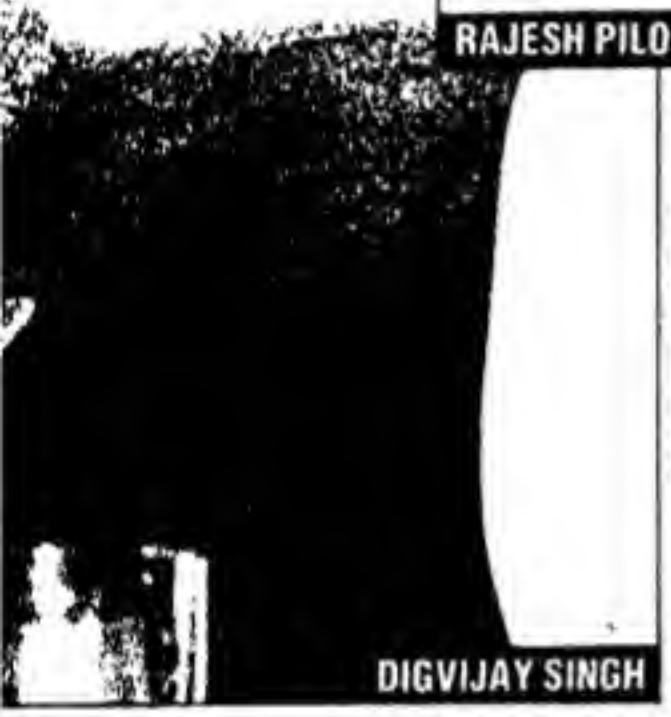
Q: What are your achievements of last four-and-a-half years of rule?
A: I never blow my trumpet.

Q: But isn't it the right time to explain? Everybody wants to know.
A: Well, I have decentralised the power: tried to bring *gram swaraj*; handed over the management of forests, primary education, and watershed management to the people. We have tried to frame the policies for the betterment of the people and increased our productivity. There has been a quantum jump in mining revenue.

Q: But then why is everybody against you?
A: You see, anyone who is in power will have Opposition. After all, there is a limit to oblige people. If anyone wants a pound of flesh

Digvijay Singh's fate hinges on the report that Rajesh Pilot will submit to the high command

RAJESH PILOT



DIGVIJAY SINGH

came after the Congress' recent poll debacle in MP. The party performed very badly with 30 state ministers contesting in the polls losing their seats. "Digvijay Singh government's image is the main reason for the poor show," says deputy CM Subhash Yadav, the main contender for CM's post.

"Corruption is the main issue in this state. The image of the government and the party have gone down and the CM isn't bothered. I haven't seen such an inept administrator," says a Cabinet colleague of Digvijay, who is close to Arjun Singh. "He is a weak CM who can't control his ministers. They are just looting the people," says a Scindia supporter.

This is one of the most trying times for Digvijay. In the past, he's managed contradictions ever since the party got divided when Arjun went away with the Congress(T) and Scindia formed the MP Vikas Congress. Moreover, he had to face two general elections. And both the times the party lost badly. Of the 17 Assembly by-polls, the Congress could win only nine. The traditional vote-bank of the Congress — the SCs, STs and the Muslims — also shifted loyalties. In 1998, out of the 15 reserved parliamentary seats, Congress won only four.

Further, Digvijay is also accused of compelling tribal leaders like Dilip Singh Bhuria and Arvind Netam to leave the party. Bhuria alleged that in 1996 elections, Digvijay got more than a dozen Independent candidates against him when he was a Congress candidate. "Only because I was raising the demand of a tribal chief minister," said Bhuria.

Today, there are more people against Digvijay Singh. In fact, even his best friend Kamal Nath is not speaking in his favour. Hazarilal Raghuvanshi, a staunch supporter of Arjun Singh, attacked Digvijay during his meeting with Sonia Gandhi. Similarly, Radheshyam Sharma, an MLA, held a press conference in Raipur to demand Digvijay's ouster.

Digvijay's detractors feel this is the right time to get rid of him. But the million dollar question before the party leadership is: who should replace him?

Apparently, both Arjun Singh and Madhavrao Scindia are not willing to become the CM. The former is too scared. "Two humiliating defeats and the chances of a possible Congress defeat in the coming Assembly polls make him feel nervous," says a senior Congress leader. Scindia, too, is disinterested. Moreover, Sonia Gandhi wouldn't like to lose Scindia. So the option is Subhash Yadav. But MLAs are not ready to accept him, though he is still Arjun Singh's choice. And so far, Kamal Nath's name has not figured.

But Digvijay is one man who will not give up easily. "He's a shrewd CM," observed an MLA. So as Rajesh Pilot prepares to place his report before the high command, it will be interesting to observe how Digvijay manages to squeeze out of the situation. •

Deshdeep Saxena/Bhopal

I have implemented all the programmes and policies of the party. And one must remember that we are fighting a cadre-based party like the BJP. So we have to create cadres at the lowest level or else we can't be a mass-based party. This is something which the Congress has to understand.

Q: There are two main allegations: that you are a bad administrator and you shield corrupt people.
A: People have seen me as PCC president, as a minister and then as a chief minister. My conscience is clear. I have never shielded corrupt people. I have accepted all the recommendations of the Lok Ayukta except where I felt they are politically motivated.

MADHAVRAO SCINDIA

Q: As PCC president you worked well. But as a chief minister you failed...
A: I have never compromised on basic Congress policies and the election manifesto. But some actions are taken as part of political management.

Q: Why is it that Arjun Singh wants to get rid of you. He feels he lost the elections because of you.
A: True, in 1996 he was contesting from Congress(T) and I opposed him as I was with Narasimha Rao. But in 1998, Arjun Singh was Congress' candidate. And I've never been dishonest to my party. So the allegation is baseless.

Q: Will you survive after Pilot submits his report?
A: Survival of Digvijay Singh is not the issue. Survival of the Congress is the issue. •

Death Of A Dream

Chandrababu Naidu's project aimed at beautifying the bank of river Musi is headed for trouble

Osmania Hospital on the banks of Musi

Four hundred years ago, Sir Mirza Ismail and Quli Qutub Shah had a vision. The two architects chose the 16 km-long bank of the Musi river to build the city of Hyderabad. The site was chosen as the river waters could be used not only for drinking, but also for the cleaning of the city. Soon, Hyderabad became a treasure house of Deccan art and culture. But little did Ismail and Shah — the founders of the city — realise that four centuries later, their dream-river would be turned into a filthy drain carrying industrial effluents and wastes of the Bapughat crematorium. And that the river bank will become a hunting ground for the greedy power-brokers and mercenary promoters.

Naidu's project will provide relief to the people from the concrete jungle of the city and will stop encroachments on the river bank

In the last two decades, wherever the massive 8 km-long stone wall got damaged the real estate 'sharks' promoted "Sai Baba temples or mosques". NTR government too developed the Musi land into a large bus stand in the capital called Imbliban Bus Stand (IBS). Today, the river bank houses 32 mosques, 22 temples and around 20 private enterprises like scooter shops, ice factories, saw mills, etc.

The last flood in the Musi caused a breach in one of its catchment reservoirs — Himayat Sagar — in 1970. The flood destroyed the river embankment. Today, only a massive banyan tree inside the Osmania Hospital complex stands as a mute witness to the nature's ravages.

Moreover, as the ground water sources dried up, the Musi river caused drinking water problem for the city residents. Even the two reservoirs, Osman Sagar and the Himayat Sagar — which provide drinking water to 85 lakh people — with a catchment area of nearly 4,329 square miles have been affected because they are fed by Musi.

Things wouldn't have worsened had the administration made full use of the waters of Musi and Easi — the main sources of water for Hyderabad. "The entire region could have been better exploited with watershed programmes in the catchment areas," said B.V. Subba Rao, a watershed and wasteland programme consultant.

Further, chemical analysis of the river waters showed the presence of nitrogen, potassium, and other organic matters. In fact, the river water, according to experts, is very polluted. No wonder the government has engaged voluntary organisations, educational institutions, police, military and para-military forces for the massive task of cleaning the debris of the river and also for clearing the encroachments.

The dried-up bed of Musi river

To prevent further deterioration in the situation, chief minister Chandrababu Naidu launched the Nandanavanam project. The project aims at stopping unauthorised dumping of garbage and debris into the river, fixing of boundaries, encouraging strip and avenue plantation, removing weeds , and stoppage of cultivation of paragrass, banning residential construction, restoring embankment and the stone railings of the river and constructing roads along the river course.

However, Nandanavanam programme has triggered a major controversy. The project, which is being executed on a war-footing and financed by the World Bank, is said to affect nearly 2,000 fami-

ing of beauty

A file picture showing the bridge being built over Musi

Four hundred years ago, Sir Mirza Ismail and Quli Qutub Shah had a vision. And they chose the bank of the Musi river to build the city of Hyderabad

Industrial effluents flowing into the Musi river

lies and private farmers residing and cultivating fodder on the encroached river bank. The district authorities are going all out to implement the programme. "Graveyards, temples, mosques will stay. But the people will have to go," said district collector Banwarlal.

But this might not be as easy as it sounds. The issue of the residents has been taken up by NGOs, COVA (confederation of voluntary association), women associations and also by the National Alliance of Peoples Movements. "We are seeking support from all quarters. Even the Stree Shakti activists from Bangalore are joining our agitation," said Dr Sunita of PIN (peoples initiative network) which has already moved the High Court and the Human Rights Commission for redressal.

The Nandanavanam Basti Samraksana Samiti (NBSS) has also moved a petition to the AP government to provide better rehabilitation for the people of Petabuge, Sankar Nagar, Moosarambagh, Wadderbasti, Tulasiram Nagar, Kamal Nagar and Moosa Nagar. "Most of the *pattas* and houses are legal in these areas," said Brother Vargheese Theckanath of PIN.

"We see something fishy in the government's claims to make Musi into a celestial garden (Nandanavanam), the district administration is pressurising the residents to self-evict themselves. These schemes will affect at least 10 lakh people," says a petition of the activists.

Government officials, however, believe that there is no conflict with the residents. "Almost 700 out of 2,000 families have already filed declarations to accept the rehabilitation offered by the state government. The residents of the region are mostly poor and belong to the neighbouring states. They are too eager to settle down, but they are being misled," said Banwarlal. "You see, no one can give protection to them because the river bank, unlike lakes and reservoirs, is a property of the Centre and does not belong to the state."

Chandrababu Naidu feels that his Nandanavanam project will improve the condition of the people of Hyderabad. "For nearly two decades the rule of corporations and communal tensions have affected the life of the people. My project is aimed at providing relief from the concrete jungle of the city. It will beautify the river bank and is the best way to stop encroachments on the river bank," he said. But the two Left parties CPI and CPI(M) do not agree. They are opposed to this project.

Similarly the heritage groups like "Save the rocks" and the Hyderabad chapter of INTACH have urged the government to be cautious as the "steam rolling" impact of the programme might wipe out some of the historic spots on the Musi banks. However, they support the state government's intention to build parks and gardens along the river bank. •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

V. GANGADHAR

The mystery of the missing lavatories in Solapur

And now a

An investigative report in a newspaper should reach a logical conclusion. The Watergate expose in the *Washington Post* led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon. An investigative report which did not provide answers to the questions raised in it is not good journalism.

The *Indian Express News Service* carried a sensational news story datelined Solapur focussing on 8,000 lavatories found missing! Yes, 8,000 loos in the eleven *taluks* of Solapur district. While detailing the roles played by the Zilla Parishad, the Block Development Officers, Gram Sevaks and the Water Supply and Sanitation Department, the story did not tell us where the missing 8,000 loos had disappeared.

The impact of the story was different in three Bombay dailies, *The Indian Express, The Times of India*, and *The Afternoon Despatch and Courier*. Let us study them in some detail:

At the 'Express Towers' in Bombay, the managing editor, the editor and senior editors were discussing the missing loos story:

Editor: This reflects badly on us. We had exposed Bofors, Sonia Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Talibans and so on but slipped on this one. Why didn't the Solapur bloke find out where the loos had gone?

Bombay Editor: He tried his best. Even made a loocount. Out of the 23,000 loos which were supposed to be there, only 15,000 existed. In fact, he counted thrice. He could not speculate because he was not a political correspondent.

Managing Editor: Is this such a major story? I mean, if we begin to deal with loos, it could affect our corporate image. The day after the story appeared, the unions pointed out that the offices needed more loos.

Editor: I dread what that Arun Shourie will write about this. He would boast that his investigative story on Antulay was complete, but that we had goofed up on our loo story.

Bombay Editor: Perhaps, we should go to Solapur and build some loos. Then, we will know more about this affair. Remember how one of our staffers, several years back 'bought' a woman, Kamala to expose trafficking in women?

Managing Editor (shudders): No, no. I remember those days. My office received so many calls to find out whether we were buying and selling women. I do not want to go into this loo-building business.

Editor: Should we ask Chitra Subramaniam to come here for some days and find out what happened to the loos? It will be a nice change for her. I mean, from groping in the dark on the Bofors.

Senior Editor: Good idea. At least, some of those connected with the loos would have kept diaries like the one kept by Martin Ardbo.

Editor: In the good, old days, we would have blamed Dhirubhai Ambani. Or Chandra Swami. Today, only Sonia Gandhi is left. Can there be an Italian connection to the missing loos?

Managing Editor: Okay, let us pray in front of Ramnathji's framed photograph. We may get some ideas on how to go about this matter.

A TOP-LEVEL editorial meeting in the *The Times of India* is discussing the same issue:

Managing Editor: You dragged me all the way from Delhi to discuss missing loos?

Loogate

Editorial Adviser: But we have clear instructions that we cannot undertake any major campaign without consulting you. 8,000 loos missing is big news and needs to be followed up.

Resident Editor: I wonder. Were they Western-style loos? I mean, like the ones they have at the UN. In that case, we can do a follow-up.

Managing Editor: If this story was broken by the *Express*, let them follow it up.

"If we begin to deal with loos, it could affect our corporate image. The day after the story appeared, the unions pointed out that the offices needed more loos"

Editorial Adviser: But then, we seldom break stories. It will be nice to tag along this one.

Managing Editor: Can we get anyone to sponser this follow up?

Response Manager: Some of the firms making septic tanks and toilet seats are quite keen. We can even come out with a two-page supplement. But they want to be photographed alongside the loos, once they are discovered.

Resident Editor: Why not ask *Bombay Times* to do the follow-up? It is the ideal paper for missing loos stories. *The Times* has a reputation.

Managing Editor: No, no. If there is a good 'response' by way of ads, the main paper should do the story. But don't entrust it to Jug Suraiya or Bachi Karkaria. This is not a laughing matter. And I do not want any 'boos' for doing the story on 'loos'.

Editorial Adviser: Once we trace the missing loos, I shall do a front-page edit. It will show that the 'leader' cares for the people.

Managing Editor: Okay, let us do the follow-up. But let the Response People handle this. They are more familiar with s___t. Look at some of the ads we carry, particularly on entertainment.

THE APPROACH to the missing loo issue was quite different in *The Afternoon Despatch & Courier*.

Editor: I will do the story myself. I am driving to Solapur. Can you get me a map? I want to decide on the towns and villages where I can stop and eat. Let us inform them that I am coming. Hope that I can get some free meals.

Secretary: Yes, sir. Here is the map.

Editor: Telephone Nana Chudasama, the ' big bore' of 'Clean Bombay' fame. He will give me a quote or two on the missing loos. I am sure Alyque Padamsee also will be interested in my mission. After all, he is into public interest advertising, though I do not know what it is all about.

Secretary: I am sure they will help as much as they can. Do you want to take anyone else with you?

Editor: Yes, our society correspondent. Even in these remote villages of Solapur, she will discover a few former rulers. Princes, sugarcane tycoons and so on. They will organise a party for her and she will drop so many new names. And I can get some free food. Oh, I forgot. Ask our sports editor Rajan Bala to come with me. He will help in counting the exact number of loos. He is good at counting though he had lost count on the words of praise he has been lavishing on Sachin Tendulkar.

Secretary: Anything else, sir?

Editor: Take out all my previous columns where I had mentioned loos. These can be published along with my main story. Get me Dom Moraes on the line. I shall ask him if he had ever encountered missing loos, while covering Eichman trial, drinking with Stephen Spender or supping with Bob Simpson or writing a book on Indira Gandhi. Having written so much on these issues and personalities, I would not be surprised if Dom can dig out something on missing loos. •

BOOK OF THE WEEK

Tales of two soldiers

The insiders' view of Partition and the 1965 India-Pakistan war

Two valuable writings by renowned generals on the Partition and the legacy of Partition have been added to the country's emaciated military archives in the golden jubilee year of Independence.

1947: A Soldier's Story is a capsule on the life and times of Major-General Mohinder Singh Chopra during the year of Independence. It has been compiled and edited by his military historian and agitation expert son, Pushpinder Singh, from his father's diaries, notes and official accounts.

The Chopra story begins with young Mohinder graduating from Sandhurst, doing stints with the Royal Fusilliers, the Rajputs, Frontier Force Rifles and commanding 1 Assam. In between, he attended the Quetta Staff College and became the first Indian to command the School of Physical Training. He saw operational service in the north-west, the Persia and Burma fronts in World War II.

EXCERPT

"I'm a friend of friends and at war with the enemy. I mean business and when I knock, I knock hard. I have deadly firepower. Make friends with us, do not fear the army. Finally, do not molest the Mohammedan evacuees if you want your own safety."

—Major-General Chopra speaking to the people of Amritsar

Train to Pakistan: half a million died on the road

The high points of his professional career in 1947 were first, the conduct of referendum in the Muslim majority Sylhet district of erstwhile Greater Assam which went to East Bengal, followed by skilful handling of the movement of refugees from East to West Punjab. At the heart of the 1947 story is Mohinder Chopra's moving narrative of the Partition —of the country, Punjab, Bengal and the armed forces.

As commandar of the Amritsar-based 123 Infantry Brigade, responsible for protection and evacuation of Muslims from East to West Punjab and internal security and defence of the Amritsar region, he witnessed the horrors accompanying the largest transmigration of refugees in recent history. Some 8 million people crossed over to opposite sides with nearly half a million perishing in the process.

Had Mohinder not given precedence to movement and security of refugees over law and order, the scale of brutality would have been more horrendous. The presence of a number of Gurkha battalions in the military evacuation organisation in Amritsar and Lahore was fortuitous in reducing the mayhem.

The book has many gems. It features, among other documents, the Assam Governor's very simple dinner menu to celebrate India's Independence on 15 August, 1947 — vegetable soup, lentil cutlets, vegetable elopic and fruit-in-cup.

1947: A Soldier's Story by Major-General Mohinder Singh Chopra. Published by The Military Studies Convention. Printed by Acgean Offset Printers, New Delhi. Pages 333. Price: not mentioned.

General Lachhman Singh's *Missed Opportunities* is a severe and deserving indictment of our higher military leadership in the planning and conduct of the 1965 war. It confirms the adage: 'War is too serious a business to be left to generals'. The retired ones do not like blaming politicians and bureaucrats for their own inadequacies and resultant problems. The fact is that generals, admirals and air marshals have not been in command of their ground, water and air space. Had they been gutsy, the armed forces would not have been in the mess they are today. Armies have to win wars to command respect.

As a seasoned gunner, Lachhman does the bedding-in for the 1965 war with a prelude on Partition, geopolitics, terrain, status of armed forces and rival military strategies. Pakistan's intent was clear: to take J&K. It began the war by testing India in the Rann of Kutch where it surprised and got the better of an unprepared Indian army.

Then came the infiltration into J&K which failed to spark the popular uprisings. What it did was to disperse our army on a wild goose chase, allowing Major-General Akhtar Hussain Malik to take Chhamb and threaten Akhnur.

Indian generals, meanwhile, had forgotten to alert the IAF about Chhamb. It responded to an SOS made at 11 am only as late as 5.30 pm on 1 September 1965. Panic followed because the corps commander Lt-General K.S. Katoch insisted that the armoured thrust would target Nowshera, not Chhamb. Lachhman says that the army chief, General J.N. Chowdhury ignored the tip-off of a build-up in Chhamb, given by the UN's Lt-General Nimmo. In order to save Akhnur and J&K, Chowdhury was forced to open a new front in Punjab. It was all-out war.

Despite Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's warning to Pakistan on 20 April, 1965, about its "aggressive activities and our army will decide its own strategy", neither side took this seriously. Pakistan could not believe India would expand the war. Chowdhury failed to exploit the advantage of surprise and initiative, free of political interference. So obsessed was he with secrecy, he didn't inform Air Chief Marshal P.C. Lal about the D-Day. The rest is the history of collective follies of the army chief, army commander, Lt-General Harbaksh Singh and the three corps commanders —Lt-General K.C. Katoch, J.S. Dhillon and P.O. Dunn.

The golden opportuniy was missed on the first day (6 September) of the offensive, when a brideshead over the Ichogil canal could not be retained and a Namka-chu type retreat was triggered. A similar withdrawal from Phillaura in Sialkot sector sealed the outcome of the war. Fortunately for India, Pakistan's counter-offensive to take Beas bridge got stalled. At one stage, according to an earlier account of this war by Harbaksh's chief of staff, Major-General Joginder Singh, our troops were on the verge of falling back on the Beas river itself.

Remains of a building in Chhamb: panic stations

The heroics of this war were confined to J&K — in small scale infantry battles at Hajipur, Tithwal and Kargil. And of course, the second battle of Dograi opposite Lahore. These were all great victories for junior commanders. The rest was bungling and blunders of senior commanders resulting in sackings and demotions of 32 officials from colonel to general. Perhaps the single biggest offence of the war was committed by Harbaksh in forcing a tired battalion into action to commemorate its battle honour — the Saragarhi Day at Khemkaran. Lachhman's very readable book gives fresh interpretation to known facts. It will leave more soldiers bitterly angry with their higher commanders. •

Missed Opportunities: Indo-Pak War, 1965, by Major General Lachhman Singh, PVSM, VrC. Published by Natraj Publishers. Pages: 364. Price: Rs 425.

Major-General Ashok K. Mehta

The reviewer was a general officer commanding of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (South) in north-eastern Sri Lanka. He is also a founder member of the Defence Planning Staff of the Chiefs of Staff Committee

Three musketeers

Indian cricket will surely benefit from the new breed of youngsters

The undeniable slump in India's cricketing fortunes may have been triggered by the grinding match schedule that is guaranteed to shorten the career of many players. But there is a silver lining to this gloomy scenario. Indian cricket will benefit hugely from the Maharashtrian musketeers.

Ajit Agarkar, Hrishikesh Kanitkar and Rahul Sanghvi not only speak a common language, but they represent the new breed of youngsters who have inculcated a tough, professional attitude to the game. This is in complete contrast to the age-old problem of the "softie" who plays well, but not hard enough. Perhaps it is the trend of the times but, from the outset of their fledgling careers, these youngsters have developed a keen sense of competitiveness which helps them to give off their best.

They have succeeded in bringing in this raw energy-driven resolve to excel, a trait that sees them always on the ball, whether batting, fielding or bowling. And all the while, maintaining an exterior calm that helps them keep focus on the game.

Agarkar is easily the pick of the lot. A bowler with a turn of speed and venom that belies his slight build, he will be the ideal foil for Javagal Srinath. And with Venkatesh Prasad also in the line-up, India has a great pace squad.

The youngster had started out as a batsman which makes his bowling prowess all the more creditable. In fact, in him India has at last found a replacement for the outstanding Kapil Dev. While it is an added bonus in Test cricket, the role of Agarkar in the limited-overs version of the game can be crucial, too.

Having a father who knows what the game entails at the top level has certainly helped Hrishikesh Kanitkar, but no matter what his father Hemant Kanitkar did, he could never have shaped any player's career unless the latter had the potential to get to the top.

Hrishikesh proved quite early that he had it in him to weather odds and find a slot ahead of several other promising youngsters. One of the main reasons being his temperament. He already has the determination to come back fighting after being put to the sword by batsmen. He remains unflappable which is an essential trait for a spinner. And he has the ability to bat well in the middle order, though bravado seems to creep into his shots, which could disappear in time.

SANTOSH GHOSH

SANTOSH GHOSH

Rahul Sanghvi has had to claw his way to the top, but this spinner, too, has shown remarkable resilience. Blessed with an ox-like determination to succeed, his temperament reminds one of Robin Singh. He is gritty and good.

Together these three may well replace some of the regulars in the Indian squad. Both Robin Singh, who isn't getting any younger, and jack-in-the-box Vinod Kambli, may rue the fact that they were sidelined owing to injury. Getting back into the team may be really difficult for them now.

SANTOSH GHOSH

(Clockwise from left) Ajit Agarkar, Hrishikesh Kanitkar and Rahul Sanghvi not only speak a common language, but have also developed a tough, professional attitude to the game

If there are three musketeers, there will also have to be a D'Artagnan. And he has already emerged, despite his skin-and-bones appearance. He is diffident but not weak. Harbhajan Singh has decided that his speaking will be done by his bowling arm which is already weaving a magic spell. The 17-year old will, in the coming years, add experience to expertise and if he chooses to remain level-headed unlike Maninder Singh, he could well have the world at his feet.

For these youngsters, it is early days yet. But if they maintain the focus they already have, Indian cricket will be served very well for at least a decade. •

Arijit Sen/Calcutta

Has anyone noticed how much Raveena Tandon resembles Twinkle Khanna in *Salakhen* — a movie in which she stars opposite Sunny Deol? And does anyone remember that this was the film during which Raveena and Sunny embarked on a passionate affair?

RAVEENA TANDON

Having established that, we'd like to remind you that Twinkle Khanna (whom Raveena resembles so closely in this movie) is the daughter of Dimple Kapadia, with whom Sunny has been having a long-time affair.

That certainly opens up a whole lot of possibilities, doesn't it?

So, Mahima (aka Ritu Chowdhury) has fallen out with mentor, Subhash Ghai, wholaunched her with such fanfare in *Pardes*. And it's not an ordinary falling out either. Ghai has taken the starlet to court for violating the terms of the contract she had signed with his company, Mukta Arts, by agreeing to appear for various foreign shows without seeking his permission.

MAHIMA CHOWDHURY

Mahima, however, contends that the contract was breached by Ghai himself when he signed another heroine for his next project rather than Mahima (apparently, the deal was that she would be signed for the next three Mukta Arts projects).

Whatever the truth of the matter, it is bound to come out in court. That's, of course, assuming that the parties don't come to an out-of-court settlement before that — and end up kissing and making up on camera.

Has Aishwarya Rai been taking evening classes to improve her dancing skills? It's certainly looking like that, especially in *Jeans* — Ash's forthcoming movie, widely hyped as the most expensive movie to be made.

AISHWARYA RAI

Not only does Rai look ethereal in the movie, she also moves like a dream.

Clearly, this former beauty queen is all set to give Karisma Kapoor and Raveena Tandon a run for their money.

Yet another generation of star kids is all set to make its debut in the movies. The most famous of them all, of course, is Abhishek Bachchan who will be launched by J.P. Dutta (of *Border* fame). Then, there is Kareena Kapoor, younger sister of Karisma and daughter of Randhir and Babita. She will be cast opposite yet another star child, Hrithik, son of Rakesh Roshan.

Clearly, these movie people believe in keeping it all within the family. •

PRADIP SANYAL

PUNJAB DA PUTTAR

[redacted] Maybe, nativity is the strongest element in our blood for, as someone pointed out, wherever our affable former PM I.K. Gujral goes he always carries a little bit of Punjab with him.

Gujral was recently in Calcutta to inaugurate the Baisakhi festival at Nicco Park. Organised by Nicco Parks and Resorts Ltd and the Punjab *Bradree*, the idea was to recreate rural Punjab in the heart of the city. After the opening formalities, IK took a walk down memory lane, sauntering around the 'typical' designer Punjabi village complete with rustic beaus and village belles, tandoori delights and the quintessential *makke de roti* and *sarso da saag*. The only thing out of place was the horde of photographers chasing the *punjab da puttar* through the 'village' square. But then, ex-Prime Ministers are seldom so forthcoming.

PRADIP SANYAL

Gujral at Nicco Park (inset) and festival views: Punjabi ambience

SWAYED BY SUFISM?

[redacted] One remarkable thing about genius is that it's rarely linear. Consider this: Manjit Bawa first acted in *Dil Se*, a Mani Ratnam film. Now he's producing his own.

AMLAN PALIWAL

Bawa: religious inspiration

Bawa says it's about Sufis. Not surprising, the theme of the movie that is, considering that he has often been mistaken for one.

There's another way of looking at it: religion needn't necessarily be the opiate of the masses. It can be inspirational too.

SIBLING RIVALRY

[redacted] Lata Mangeshkar says she wouldn't be caught dead singing *Choli ke peechhay* kind of songs that are all the rage today. Her sister Asha Bhonsale says there's nothing wrong with Indipop and remixes. Sibling rivalry? Or a more fundamental clash of cultures?

SADYANTO CHATTERJEE

Asha Bhonsale and Lata Mangeshkar: the times they are achanging

We don't know, but it's clear the two singing sisters don't see eye to eye on the way popular music is going in India. While Lata, threatened by younger singers and worried about going out of fashion, refuses to compromise on the sort of songs she's ready to sing, Asha is going from award to MTV award after the success of her remixed albums.

Maybe, Lata should listen to what her younger sis said recently: *"jaanam samjha karo"*.

THE INSIDER

Another celeb from artworld—only this time it's filmmaker to author. Mahesh Bhatt is attempting to write a book which will be an autobiographical insider's view of the entertainment industry.

Bhatt, who is the director of films as diverse as *Saaransh*, *Sir* and *Daddy*, will of course continue to direct and produce films. He's working on a comedy, *Duplicate*, starring Shah Rukh Khan but doesn't want to talk about it. But it's the book project that's exciting. First, nobody can be more of an insider than Bhatt—he began his career as a nightclub crooner and went on to become a talent-spotter of some repute. And second, only an insider can tell you the secrets of a family. Explosive stuff, is what we are waiting for.

MODEL PLANS

Supermodel Nayanika Chatterjee was one of the panellists at the launch of a new modelling course by Tarang, a centre for performing arts. From the institute's point of view, Calcutta lacked a professional grooming school. Now they'd fill that void, says Nayanika. Excerpts from a question-answer session with the audience:

Q: Modelling's the in-thing now, but what do we look forward to?
A: Yeah, you have to go after a point. Why not have alternate career plans...

Q: Like what?
A: How about taking your studies seriously now. At least, [it] gives you a platform, right?

Q: Think Tarang can do anything for Calcutta models?
A: That's why we are here today.

Q: No, about basic training...
A: Bang on. We'll have people from Bombay for special sessions. They'll coordinate and arrange shows. We don't lack creativity, it's just that we need to improve our presentation.

Q: But aren't most of the shows here just *tamashas*?
A: That's being pessimistic. Why don't you wait for a while, there'll be serious shows pretty soon,..what the market needs.

Q: Your involvement with Tarang?
A: I only work for organisations which, I believe, have [illegible]bility.

Q: So we hope for better prospects?
A: Sure, why not?

TELEVISION

Small screen, big venture

A scene from TV serial *Thenpandi Singam*

Tamil Nadu CM Karunanidhi writes the script for a TV serial

Writing scripts is his forte. And Tamil Nadu chief minister Muthuvel Karunanidhi is back to what he does best. Keeping pace with the times — moving away from the silver screen — he is now making forays into the small screen. Karunanidhi has written the story and dialogues for *Thenpandi Singam*,, a 26-episode TV serial being telecast on Madras Doordarshan from 8 March. The TV serial penned by the CM has got a prime-time slot on Sunday mornings at 8.30 am.

Karunanidhi is well-known for his literary abilities and is regarded among intellectuals as 'a man with a powerful pen'. In fact, along with the Late C.N. Annadurai, he had given voice to the Dravidian movement by penning forceful scripts for films like *Parasakthi*.

Thenpandi Singam, set in the 19th century, is a true story based on the resistance movement led by a local chieftain against the Britishers. The story revolves around two chieftans who become victims of the 'Divide and Rule' policy of the Britishers.

The story begins three years after the British hang the legendary freedom fighter Verapandiya Kattabomman. Kattabomman's brother now seeks refuge in Sivagangai kingdom and the British turn to the kingdoms of Pattamangalam and Baganari to capture the fugitive. But the two local kings refuse to betray their fellow ruler and earn the wrath of the colonial power. With this starts an emotional era of love and hate, friendship and betrayal, family pride versus social compulsions, intrigue and all other *masala*.

The serial is a faithful adaptation of an award-winning novel written by Karunanidhi in the popular Tamil weekly '*Kungumam*', a few years back. Subsequently, poet-and-film director Ilaya Bharati took a liking to it and decided to serialise it on Doordarshan. The actual work for the serial started five years back, when Jayalalitha was the CM and Narasimha Rao, the PM of India. But they saw to it that the serial was not approved, because Jayalalitha constantly believes that Karunanidhi in all his recent writings has made deliberate jabs at her.

Writing scripts is his forte. And Muthuvel Karunanidhi is back to what he does best: he has written the story and dialogues for *Thenpandi Singam*, a 26-episode TV serial being telecast on Madras Doordarshan

Meanwhile, without waiting for a formal approval to come through, Ilaya Bharati started to work. But he soon discovered that top artistes were unwilling to act in a serial written by Karunanidhi, as they did not want to antagonise Jayalalitha. Finally, Nasser, one of the finest actors in the industry, and, a former top actress, Geeta agreed to play the lead roles. Ilayaraja, the music director, was roped in to compose music for the serial.

And once Karunanidhi became the chief minister of Tamil Nadu and the United Front government came to power, the I&B minister Jaipal Reddy cleared the project and gave it an out-of-turn 26 episodes. The actual shooting started a year back and the state government provided location sites like the famous Nayakar Mahal in Madurai and the Amir Mahal in Madras. According to industry sources, a minister in the Karunanidhi government is funding the project.

What is Jayalalitha's reaction? Rumour mills have it that Jayalalitha will use her influence with the BJP to stop the TV serial midway. Made at a whopping cost of over Rs 1 crore, the serial might not cover its expenditure. But the producer aims to make money by dubbing the serial in other southern languages and selling it to its neighbouring states. What's more, a Hindi satellite channel is also said to be showing great interest in dubbing the serial in Hindi.

Viewers in Madras, meanwhile, are more interested to know whether Karunanidhi will make any snide remarks against his *bete noire* Jayalalitha in the TV serial. Watch this space. •

Sreedhar Pillai/Madras

BIHAR

Crime capital

How safe is Patna?

Peace eludes Patna. As criminals rule the roost and police inaction becomes the rule rather than the exception, life in the Bihar capital is precarious, if not petrifying. People here live under the ominous shadow of extortion, kidnapping and murder.

"There is no guarantee that having stepped out in the morning, one will return home safely," observes a businessman of Patna. And it is not the business community alone that is under threat. The fear of living on the edge haunts every man on the streets of Patna these days, and nights.

Banks are being looted, shops are being ransacked, businessmen are being mugged and kidnapped. More than Rs 16 lakh have been looted in various incidents of armed robbery over the last three months. During this period, three businessmen have been kidnapped for an astronomical ransom while three others have been abducted and killed.

On 6 April, Ajit Singhania, the son of a cloth merchant in Patna City, was kidnapped. Though the three main culprits were identified, the police have not managed to track the boy down (till the time of going to press). Sources in the police department believe that Ajit has been kept captive somewhere in the 'Diara' area (the riverine belt along the Ganges). And the cops have been carrying out random raids at several places.

But this is just not good enough for the distraught family. The Singhanias have been making endless trips to the Maner police station; they have met chief minister Rabri Devi, who has assured them that young Ajit would be brought back home soon; the boy's uncle is staging a *dharna* to protest police failure; and the entire business community in Patna City has virtually risen in revolt.

Things came to a head when a *bandh* was called in Patna City to protest Ajit's abduction. The police swung into action to keep the protestors at bay. Several agitators and innocent bystanders were beaten up as the SDO Patna City, R.N. Mohanty, led the lathi charge. Those arrested included Amarnath Singhania, Ajit's father.

SANJAY KUMAR

SYSTEMS FAILURE: *the police clash with a mob protesting the growing lawlessness in Patna*

Less than a week after the abduction of Ajit, the business community in Patna was shaken by a daring dacoity committed near the Kadam Kuan police station. At around 8 pm on 11 April, Anjani Kumar, a gold merchant, was chatting with some business associates when the door-bell rang. As soon as Kumar's wife opened the door, some 15 armed men barged into the house. Holding their two young daughters at gunpoint, the dacoits left with quite a booty: more than Rs 35 lakh in cash, alongwith gold ornaments and other valuables — one of the largest loots in Patna's criminal history.

Kumar and his friends were quick to raise an alarm, and some locals even managed to nab one of the culprits, Nageshwar Yadav, while the rest fled in a jeep. Despite being informed, a police party stationed nearby refused to entertain any complaint, even to use the wireless for intercepting the fleeing vehicle, "without a written order".

As news of the dacoity spread, the reputed gold market of Bakerganj in Patna downed shutters. The agitated gold dealers blocked the road and even clashed with the local police, when they came to clear the way. Though the road blockade was later lifted, gold dealers and merchants declared that till the case was solved and the looted amount and articles recovered, no business transaction would take place and shops would remain closed.

"No one is safe here. This is the reason why many businessmen are leaving Bihar to settle elsewhere," said the Bihar

ACTION STATIONS: *Sushil Kumar Modi (left); Nitish Kumar*

Industries Association (BIA) president K.P. Jhunjhunwala.

As far as the police administration goes, there has been a change of guard at the top. After three extensions, director general of police (DGP) S.K. Saxena stepped down last month. Now, K.A. Jacob finds himself in the hot seat.

The new incumbent, of course, has his task cut out. Various reasons are cited for the failure of the police in curbing crime in the capital. Lack of finance for funding the old 'Mukhbir' (informer) system is one. Shortage of dedicated, honest and capable police officers; lack of leadership and teamwork are some of the others. There is also talk of corruption and a cop-criminal nexus.

Recently, the home secretary, R.K. Singh, came down heavily on all zonal IGs, DIGs and SPs regarding the blatant violation of the rules laid down in the Police Manual. Singh has directed senior police officers to review the list of postings and then remove all junior officers who have been posted in one district for more than the tenure prescribed in the manual.

ASHOK MAHINDER

HARD TIMES: *chief minister Rabri Devi*

Meanwhile, DGP K.A. Jacob has begun in right earnest. He is keeping the Patna police on its toes and is chalking out a special operation to curb crime in the capital.

Politically, the Opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Samata Party combine has seized upon the growing lawlessness in Patna to attack the Rabri Devi-led Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) government. "It is not a breakdown of law and order, but a complete absence of law and order. No one can feel safe in this 'Jungle Raaj'. Criminals are being protected by the ruling party and the police," alleges BJP leader of the Opposition, Sushil Kumar Modi. The BJP has announced that it will launch a violent protest campaign if the law-and-order situation does not improve within 15 days.

"Criminals rule the roost here. And how can the government stop it when the RJD leaders themselves are patronising these criminal elements?" demands Union railway minister and Samata Party leader Nitish Kumar.

With a section of the BJP-led coalition at the Centre gunning for the Rabri regime; and large sections within the Congress eager to end its association with the RJD, the rising crime graph in Patna is bad news for Laloo Prasad Yadav and Co. •

Naved Zahir/Patna

ANDHRA PRADESH

Say no to Naidu

That seems to be the political slogan in the state

The fractured mandate of the 12th Lok Sabha has changed the arithmetic of Andhra politics. "Anti-Congressism and anti-communalism have given way to anti-Naiduism," observed leader of the Congress in the state Assembly, P. Janardhan Reddy.

The Congress, targeted as "prime enemy" by chief minister N. Chandrababu Naidu is busy working out an alliance with the Majlisi-Ittehadul-Muslimeen (MIM). The Telugu Desam Party (TDP) chief's decision to support the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition at the Centre has made him a "villain" among disgruntled Muslims. "Naidu won the nine seats in Telengana only with the support of the minority and Dalit votes," asserted MIM leader Sultan Salauddin Owaisi.

Meanwhile, a non-Congress, non-BJP, non-TDP front is emerging from the political cauldron of Andhra Pradesh. 'Anti-Naiduism' forms the basis of the new front, which includes, among others, the CPI(M), the CPI, the Janata Dal, the estranged minority party, Majlis Bachao Tahreek (MBT), Lakshmi Parvathi's NTR-TDP, and two splinter Naxalite groups, the Praja Pantha and Janashakti. These disparate forces will come together at a massive rally in Hyderabad on 4 May. "Naidu will feel the pinch of being out of the United Front," warned Janata Dal leader N. Narasimha Reddy.

Dial D for death

A young man in Howrah kills himself to protest corruption in the system

"We are living in such a system where it is difficult to live...My family is not responsible for my death. It's me and the system (read: corruption) who are responsible and those who practice it, they are responsible. To compromise with principle is a part of death."

Thus wrote Suhrid Ganguly in one of the suicide notes that he left behind for his mother and the police. The 22-year-old engineer hanged himself from the ceiling of his room at Dharmatala Lane, under the Shibpur police station, in Howrah, in the afternoon of 15 April.

NO COMPROMISE: *Suhrid Ganguly*

Suhrid died in his crusade against corruption in the 'system' in general and the telecom industry in particular. And in his death, he achieved what he had failed to do when he was alive: the telephone in his house, which had

UNDER PRESSURE: *N. Chandrababu Naidu*

"The one surreptitious act of Naidu to support the BJP government in the vote of confidence has upset the entire balance of Andhra politics," observed B.V. Raghavulu, state secretary of the CPI(M), who has spearheaded the anti-Naidu movement in the communist camp. The CPI(M) has clearly stated that it cannot have any "political understanding" with the TDP as long as Naidu supported the BJP. The CPI state council waited till the completion of the Rajya Sabha elections before announcing its decision to snap links with the TDP as there was no "ideological base" between them.

The UF leaders in the state have accused Naidu of playing a double game and ditching the Front. "Had he told us that he wanted a Speaker from the TDP, we would have spoken to our national leadership and arranged it from the UF combine itself," said S. Sudhakar Reddy, state secretary of the CPI. "It was a case of Naidu ditching us, rather than the Front taking a pro-Congress stand," added Dal leader Narasimha Reddy.

At the end of a month's hectic political activity, in New Delhi and Hyderabad, the political equation emerging in Andhra Pradesh is quite dramatically different from what it was before the Lok Sabha elections. The forthcoming municipal elections and five Assembly by-polls should indicate the political trends in the state. The three possible combinations emerging in the state are: a TDP-BJP combine; a Left-Janata Dal-TDP(NTR)-MBT...front; the Congress-MIM alliance.

Not for the first time, all eyes are on Chandrababu Naidu and no one is quite sure what he will do next. Says D. Shivarama Reddy, a senior TDP general secretary, "The pressure is mounting on Naidu. Some are telling him to join the BJP government, others are advising him to sever ties with the BJP. But Naidu, who has nurtured his own political graph for the last 15 years, is in no hurry." •

G.S. Radhakrishna/Hyderabad

been lying 'dead' for more than a week, started ringing, hours after the young man had killed himself.

But what pushed Suhrid over the edge? The telephone at their place had been out of order for a week and the young man was upset watching his mother — employed with the South-Eastern Railway on compassionate grounds after the death of Suhrid's father in 1984 — getting tense about not being able to talk to his brother Sudip in Baroda.

Wrote Suhrid in one of his suicide notes: "Last Saturday, I requested Chakraborty and a bearded man (both linemen)...the phone is not working...It is their job, their responsibility to maintain the phone...We are paying a lot of dough to the government for maintenance...Talking to them, I felt that they won't do the job without pecuniary benefits. But principally, I am against offering bribes. So I invited them over for snacks but they won't settle for anything less than Rs 50."

The linemen left without repairing the fault. "I have compromised a lot throughout my life. I am not happy with myself. I do not want to live," concluded the young man.

But Suhrid — who was just completing his mechanical engineering diploma from APC Polytechnic in Jadavpur University and was ready to take up a job with Larsen and Toubro from July — gave absolutely no indication of his intentions to either family or friends.

That Wednesday began like any other day in the Ganguly household. Suhrid's mother had left for work and he and his cousin, Sujoy, settled down to watch *Terminator-II* on Star Movies. "I came downstairs to our room after the movie at 11.30 am. Suhrid retired to his room on the first floor," said Sujoy.

This was the last time that anyone saw Suhrid alive. "We did not bother to check what he was doing as there was nothing unnatural in his behaviour," said Arnab, another cousin brother.

Suhrid's mother returned at 5.30 pm to find the door locked from inside. When there was no response, the family members broke open the door, only to find Suhrid hanging.

His relatives and friends are still in a state of shock. "He was so full of life. A brilliant student, Tukai (Suhrid's nickname) loved adventure sports...," recalled Jyotin Biswas, a neighbour. "He was very popular among the young and old alike," added Srikumar Mukherjee.

Meanwhile, the wheels of justice have been set into motion. Howrah SP Surajit Kar Purakayastha has said that two telecom employees named and described by Suhrid have been arrested under 'prevention of corruption' and 'abetment to commit suicide' and remanded to police custody till 27 April. "I have ordered an enquiry. The guilty will be punished," pledged a visibly shaken K.R. Ramanujam, chief general manager, Calcutta Telephones. •

Avijit Nowell Majumder/Calcutta

WEST BENGAL

The plot thickens

Who caught Pradip Gogoi?

Several days of grilling, hadn't robbed ULFA vice-chairman Pradip Gogoi of his composure. When he was led up to the chief judicial magistrate's court in Calcutta on 16 April, before being taken back to Assam, Gogoi looked remarkably calm and dignified. He thanked the court and the police for the way he was treated while in custody, and prayed for similar treatment in Assam. This, he said, was necessary for the sake of his own health and the "sake of his nation". It was clear that the secessionist leader hadn't undergone a change of heart: he still stood for a free and independent Assam.

To many it seemed surprising that a man of Gogoi's antecedents was treated with so much care and caution. It was equally strange that a police force, which has a truly dismal human rights record, should be given a clean chit by a badly wanted man who was nabbed following the laying of an elaborate trap. Even more astonishing was the police version that Gogoi hadn't disclosed anything substantial — not even after eight days of gruelling questioning!

Indeed, a few things were so grossly inconsistent that serious doubts arose about whether Gogoi's was at all a case of arrest or surrender. For instance, the army and the police were extremely cagey about where Gogoi had been staying and when he was arrested.

The police maintained that Gogoi was staying at the Rail Yatri Niwas in Howrah station from 6 to 8 April. To find a place there, it is necessary to produce a railway ticket. The police are unable to say whether he had one.

Death in the family

The Gorumara wildlife sanctuary mourns the loss of two beloved elephants

A pall of gloom has descended over the Gorumara wildlife sanctuary in the Dooars area of Jalpaiguri district. The forest officials, mahouts, and workers here are mourning the deaths of two of their favourite inmates: six-month-old Ramprasad and twelve-year-old Nidhi. Both these elephants passed away in late March.

In July '97, the pride of the forest department of West Bengal, Jatraprasad, had died of ill health. In November '97, little Ramprasad made his entry into Gorumara, quite by chance. Some wild elephants roaming the area in search of food had strayed into the Gurjangjhora tea garden of the Dooars. While the rest of the herd left the garden, a one-and-a-half-month-old elephant fell into a ditch and was left behind.

The next day, forest officials found and rescued the baby elephant from the ditch. They took the animal to Burikhola forest area near Malbazar to reunite it with its herd. But the seniors soon deserted the baby elephant, probably because it bore the smell of humans. The forest officials later brought the baby elephant to Gorumara wildlife sancutary, and decided to take care of it. It was named Ramprasad.

Mahout Subal Oraon was entrusted with the task of bringing up the baby elephant. Subal told SUNDAY: "At that age, like all other creatures, the elephant baby too needs his mother. At first, I tried my best to heal the wounds of Ramprasad, developed after its fall in the ditch at Gurjangjhora. I fed Ramprasad Lactogen milk, in a big feeding bottle, every two hours. And I stayed with the baby all day and night."

Veterinary doctors, too, attended to him regularly. All possible care was taken. But that was just not enough for a motherless child. And Ramprasad breathed his last at the age of six months, in the third week of March.

Soon, another tragedy struck Gorumara. On 9 January this year, the forest officials found a huge female teenage elephant in the nearby jungle. Surprisingly, this 'wild' elephant was behaving like a trained one. Her behaviour reminded the forest officials and mahouts of a two-year-old elephant which had fled Jaldapara wildlife sanctuary ten years ago, while she was undergoing training there.

Sure that the long-lost elephant had returned, the members of Gorumara were overjoyed. She was named Nidhi. She bore a deep wound on her trunk, probably the mark of an arrow. Nidhi was provided with all possible care and medical treatment. But she, too, died in the last week of March.

And life in the Gorumara wildlife sanctuary has not been the same since. •

Ivo Gaba/Jalpaiguri

ANIMAL FARM: *the Gorumara wildlife sanctuary*

SUDIP ACHARYA

DISCLOSURE: *Pradip Gogoi in custody*

Initially, the police told the press that Gogoi had arrived in Calcutta on 4 April, but didn't specify where he put up on arrival. Then, a piece of news appeared in a Calcutta daily which said that Gogoi had, in fact, been picked up by the army on 6 April, two days before he was officially arrested, from Paramount Hotel, off Lindsay Street in central Calcutta.

So, was the ULFA leader in army custody for two days while people were made to believe that he was hanging around at the Yatri Niwas? The police at first denied the story, and then refused to speak when SUNDAY confronted them with the fact that the police had taken xerox copies of the hotel's guest register.

Employees of the hotel told SUNDAY that a man call Ashok Kumar had checked in on 4 April and had been taken away by armymen on 6 April. They realised only later, from newspaper photos, that Kumar was, in fact, Gogoi. The hotel manager told SUNDAY that the police arrived soon afterwards and took xerox copies of the relevant pages of the register.

An intelligence agency source later confided, on condition of anonymity, that Gogoi had given himself up. He had apparently sent feelers to the army 4 Corps in Guwahati through a former ULFA activist. The 4 Corps contacted the ministry of defence which immediately relayed the information to the home ministry (internal affairs) in Delhi. The Union home ministry then got in touch with the West Bengal home ministry and the Eastern Command headquarters in Fort William, Calcutta. The military intelligence was asked to get into the act.

And once the stage was set, Gogoi came to Calcutta from an ULFA camp in Bhutan, only to be arrested. The course of security operations in the next few months will make it clear what Gogoi has told his interrogators and what he hasn't. •

Soumen Datta/Calcutta

TELEVISION

SHUBHRA GUPTA

Tele-tales

Some soaps worth watching

Billed as India's First Weekend Soap, *Kabhie Kabhie* (Saturday, Sunday, 9.30 pm, Star TV), has begun demanding attention. When it started out, in mid-January, it had the *Swabhimaan* look (not surprising, because both come from Amit Khanna's Plus Channel, and both share Mahesh Bhatt as director, and several actors), but now it has acquired a face of its own.

Kabhie Kabhie tells the story of two childhood pals, who grow up to become lawyers, and bitter rivals. The interesting thing is that the lawyers are women, and are played by two capable actors, Shefali Chaya and Iravati Harshe.

Harshe first came into prominence with *Shanti* (off Doordarshan, on to a re-run on Zee); and it is difficult not to bump into Chaya on prime time. She stepped into Seema Kapoor's part in *Hasratein* and gave it much-needed gravity. She also has a major role in Zee's other

THE BHATT ORIGINAL: Swabhimaan

long-playing serial, *Daraar*, and is, on the whole, a pleasure to watch, even if there is a sameness to the way she comes across.

The other piece of fiction which has begun holding its own quite soon after its launch is *Deewar* (DD-I, 2.30 pm), from the Vinita Nanda-Raman Kumar camp. These are the names behind *Tara* and a score of other serials on Zee, all of which dealt with warring individuals and families. *Deewar* gives us more of the same, but Nanda's script and the acting keep things ticking.

One serial where things never stop ticking, barring a few barren patches, is the Bhatt original, *Swabhimaan*. Last week, Mahen Malhotra's ex-wife got married to her chubby fiance, surrounded by the entire Malhotra *khandaan*. •

KUSUM BHANDARI

BEGINNING 26 APRIL, 1998

ARIES

(21 March-20 April)

Love is not to be bought. Material standards are not enough for your satisfaction. You may be hard to please or may find that your nearest and dearest cannot be content with what is going on. Shopping around can be frustrating.

TAURUS

(21 April-20 May)

A relationship that has been gradually growing in intensity over the year may be coming to the crossroads. It may seem that you are better off without a reliable business partner. You will be glad to see the return of a child away on a pleasure outing.

GEMINI

(21 May-20 June)

Don't take your love life too seriously. Personal things may not take precedence. But young hearts beat too fast for care or caution. A young member of the family may be upset because a romantic affair is broken. Don't be misled by a handsome face.

CANCER

(21 June-20 July)

There can be a distraction but you cannot be deterred for too long. You're smart enough to ignore a delay. Be firm in your management. Don't be too proud to bargain. Settle for the best.

LEO

(21 July-20 August)

Business drive gets you a reputation for success through action. Make full use of the resources at your disposal. Immediate action gets the prize. Be aggressive where money is concerned. Be ambitious. Given the go-ahead, make your personal mark.

VIRGO

(21 August-20 September)

Your thirst for knowledge, learning and intellectual stimulation can reach a new peak. You could be joining groups of classes where you can study new ideas and subjects in the company of like-minded people.

LIBRA

(21 September-20 October)

It's important not to disappoint people or keep them waiting around for answers. Don't raise the expectation of others when you really have no intention of delivering the goods. You can easily become the victim of emotional blackmail or manipulation.

SCORPIO

(21 October-20 November)

If you have lagged behind schedule at work, there should be opportunities for catching up. Or there may be the chance to increase earnings. It may be necessary to embellish facts or tell white lies to make people sit up and take notice.

SAGITTARIUS

(21 November-20 December)

Social involvement seems to suit you and open-air is far more attractive than indoors. A professional adviser can save your face, time and money. The performance of a partner or team-mate can leave much to be desired. You win a few, lose a few.

CAPRICORN

(21 December-20 January)

Don't do anything that can put you on the wrong side of the law. Contravening rules and regulations can land you in deep trouble. Don't think that you can get away with anything. There may be some difficult decisions regarding who to reward and promote.

AQUARIUS

(21 January-20 February)

Circumstances will allow you to devote sufficient time to both sets of demands and responsibilities, without placing a great strain upon you. Someone you have taken a fancy to can make it clear he/she feels the same way about you. Exciting romance is on the cards.

PISCES

(21 February-20 March)

Why not try approaching financial problems from a new angle? More use of imagination can solve long-standing difficulties. Get to the bottom of things. Valuable facts and figures can come to light. •

Have we met?

Two new ministers who might be regarded as socially well-connected in Delhi have evoked different responses from their old friends.

Vasundhara Raje, the minister of state in the external affairs ministry, has all her old pals raving about how she remains the same straight-forward person despite her assumption of high office.

In contrast, Naveen Patnaik, the minister for steel and mines, is perceived as having turned his back on the friendships he had kept for decades. Old friends complain that he doesn't return their calls or bother to keep up.

Patnaik's supporters say that he has simply been busy and that the friends are being unreasonable but there's no denying the strength of the how-could-Pappu-do-this-to-us sentiment in certain circles.

Checkmate

West Bengal PCC member Priya Ranjan Das Munshi thought he had exposed the whole rotten system when during his speech at the AICC chaired by Sonia Gandhi, he charged that he had been defeated neither by the Trinamul Congress nor the BJP and the CPI(M). Those who had plotted his defeat were in the Congress itself.

The reference was to Pranab Mukherjee, who disregarded the charge. Then Mukherjee got a chance to get his own back. After the electoral defeat of the Congress in West Bengal, the state Congress committee was dissolved and a coordination committee set up in its stead to oversee the Panchayat elections. On Pranab Mukherjee's recommendation, Das Munshi was kept out of this committee, because it was argued, he was a defeated candidate.

But it was the anti-Das Munshi faction in the West Bengal unit which had the last laugh. Because when the coordination committee list was announced, among those who figured on it was Dilip Das, the Congressman who connived to defeat Das Munshi.

And for Pranab Mukherjee it was sweet revenge.

HEARD IN NEW DELHI

What is it about the communications ministry? First Sukh Ram. And now Buta Singh...

A BUREAUCRAT ATTACHED TO THE MINISTRY

CHECK-LIST

India's fashion designers — how they stack up

■ **Abraham and Thakore:** Top of the heap. Still the only Indian designers (with the exception of Asha Sarabhai) to have any credibility abroad. Because they are not greedy, their prices are surprisingly reasonable.

■ **Ritu Beri:** India's most famous designer. More people have seen her beautiful face than her clothes however. For the most part, these clothes are embroidered *salwar-kameezes*.

■ **Rohit Bal:** A senior designer by virtue of having been around for so long. Good media relations and a loyal clientele of Maharani Bagh matrons.

■ **J.J. Valaya:** Over-hyped, over-priced and over-sized. He runs a nice shop though on the outskirts of Delhi. Shame about the clothes.

■ **Tarun Tahiliani:** Another senior designer (*see Rohit Bal, above*) with the difference that he is as popular in Malabar Hill as Maharani Bagh.

■ **Shahab Durazi:** Imagine that a master-cutter had got hold of the Armani catalogue and recreated the best clothes. That's Durazi, reliable, top-quality if slightly lacking in flair.

■ **Rina Dhaka:** Under-rated because of her slightly spaced-out style which leads people to under-estimate her. There's real talent here without pretension.

■ **Raghuvendra Rathore:** The designer to watch. Will be the biggest Indian designer of the next century.

■ **Rajesh Pratap Singh:** Slightly derivative of Asha Sarabhai but potentially, a first-division designer.

Successful campaign

For those interested in collecting trivia, here is a piece of information.

Remember the advertisement supplement which appeared as part of a national daily to felicitate Atal Behari Vajpayee on his birthday, 25 December?

The moving force behind the supplement was current political adviser to the Prime Minister, Pramod Mahajan. Mahajan cottoned on to the fact Vajpayee would be the man India awaits and got industrialists and others to contribute towards the supplement. The cost? Rs 1 crore 10 lakh.

Pramod Mahajan: the man behind the supplement

Mahajan gave instructions that no contributions towards the supplement under Rs 10 lakh should be accepted. Although the RSS and elements in the BJP were deeply unhappy at this ostentatious waste of money, clearly the weapon found its target — Mahajan was appointed political adviser to the man India was awaiting. •

DELHI DIARY

Short supply

Sonia Gandhi's reclusiveness is having a serious fallout.

Within days of being formally elected president of the Congress party after the New Delhi session of the party, pictures of Sitaram Kesri and Narasimha Rao were taken down from the walls of the AICC headquarters. Workers began looking for pictures of Sonia Gandhi — and found no one had any good quality portraits.

Sonia Gandhi: her pictures are in great demand

Except one or two poster sellers who are camped at AICC (in Congress parlance they are permanent invitees to the party). Realising shrewdly that there were big bucks to be made here, the poster sellers hiked up the rates of the few Sonia Gandhi portraits they had. As a result, a photograph which used to sell for Rs 50 a few weeks earlier, was retailed at Rs 500 a piece. A worker was heard telling another proudly that he'd bought his portrait in 'black' (the black market) for Rs 600!

But now the problem is that the stockists have run out of pictures and there are no fresh ones because no one has got a chance to shoot portraits of the new Congress president. No doubt some enterprising Congressmen will arrange a photo-session. But till then, photographs of Sonia Gandhi are a hot commodity.

HEARD IN NEW DELHI

Mother Teresa spread light throughout the world but her biographer Navin Chawla spreads darkness throughout Delhi.

A POLITICIAN ON SOCIALLY-MOBILE BUREAUCRAT NAVIN CHAWLA, CURRENTLY HEADING THE DELHI VIDYUT BOARD

Identity crisis

From statements made by its minister, it looks as if the BJP government is yet to settle down to business. For one thing, many of the ministers seem to be suffering from an identity crisis. They all seem to want to make statements on subjects outside the purview of their portfolios.

So defence minister George Fernandes lets fly about Chinese expansionist ambitions (*see cover story*), legitimately a concern of the ministry of external affairs; parliamentary affairs minister Madan Lal Khurana issues clarifications about the rent control act and construction by laws in Delhi, a matter for the urban development ministry; and urban development minister Ram Jethmalani makes completely unconstitutional observations about Supreme Court judges, a subject for which he is not exactly popular with the judges.

T.N. Seshan implemented the code of conduct to the letter and reformed the election process. Maybe Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee needs to have a code of conduct for his ministers.

A.B. Vajpayee: time to act

CHECK-LIST

Former Prime Ministers: what they are doing

■ **I.K. Gujral:** He didn't speak in Parliament, neither during the confidence motion nor during the motion of thanks to the President's address. Is busy releasing books and kissing babies.

■ **H.D. Deve Gowda:** Is camped in Bangalore to regain the ground he lost in the state during his Delhi sojourn. His sons are stirring up things as usual. Is busy visiting astrologers to find out what the best time for toppling the J.H. Patel government would be.

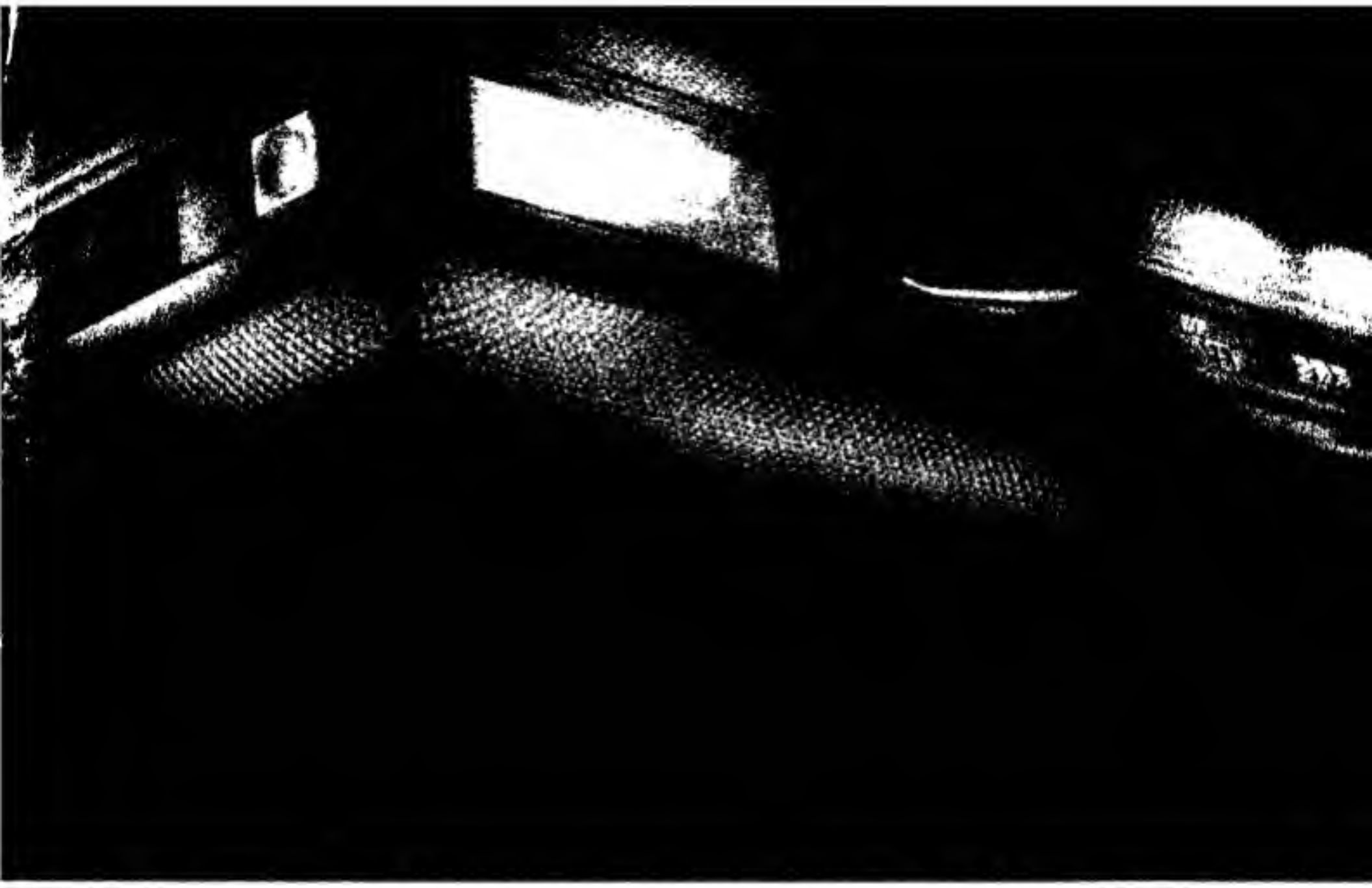
■ **P.V. Narasimha Rao:** Has written one book, granted interviews and launched himself as a writer. But is not resting on his laurels. Between making speeches at Congress functions, is working on a second book on Ayodhya.

■ **Chandra Shekhar:** Is trying to unite the Janata Dal for the nth time under his leadership. Finds it heavy going.

Anxious moments

US envoy Bill Richardson had an eventful South Asia trip which consisted of meeting Presidents, Prime Ministers and foreign office bureaucrats. However, his trip was also about getting stranded in a US Air Force aircraft for about 40 minutes after hydraulic systems failed.

US officials on the trip had some terribly anxious moments after the aircraft landed at Agra but the doors wouldn't open. For 42 minutes, the US Air Force fiddled with its insides as the temperature inside the aircraft rose. Alcohol was dispensed liberally to calm nerves. The air force politely refused offers of Indian help. Everyone was vastly relieved — the Indians as much as the Americans — when finally the doors swung open and those sitting inside made a dash for the tarmac and fresh air.



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